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Miroir Danjere

Joseph Epstein
The Pleasures of Reading

David Mason
The Life of Poetry

Randolph Thomas
May Prescott—a story

Susan Balée
Two-Part Harmony

POEMS BY Michael Van Walleghen, Patricia Goedicke, Cathleen Calbert, Robert Phillips, Allen Hoey

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TO OUR READERS

New books by editors of THE HUDSON REVIEW have recently been published. In accordance with our policy, they will not be reviewed in these pages, but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

HAYDEN CARRUTH: *Selected Essays & Reviews.* Copper Canyon Press. $18.00p.

FREDERICK MORGAN: *Poems for Paula.* Story Line Press. $14.00; $8.00.

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD: *English Papers: A Teaching Life.* Graywolf Press. $22.95.

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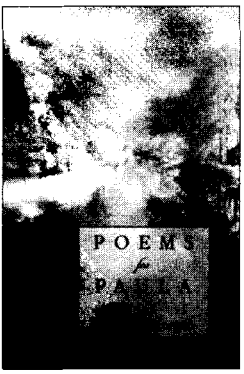
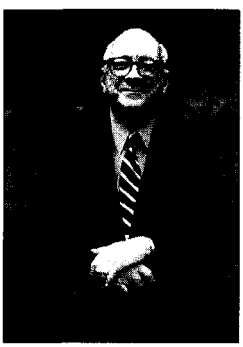


POEMS FOR PAULA

by FREDERICK MORGAN



FREDERICK MORGAN, a founding editor of *The Hudson Review*, continues today as a co-editor. He is the author of nine books of poetry, including *Poems: New and Selected*, and two volumes of prose.

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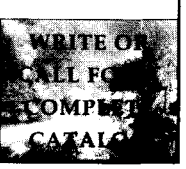

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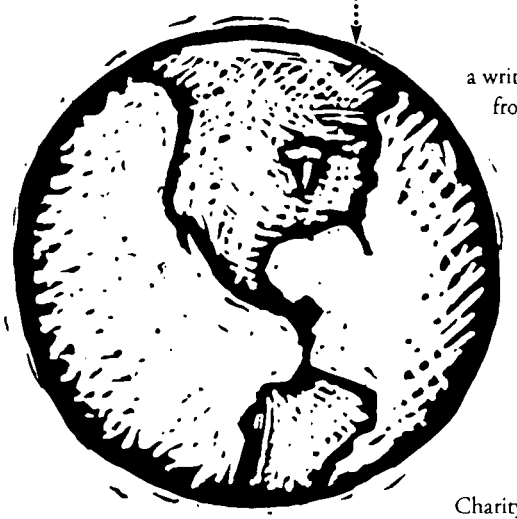

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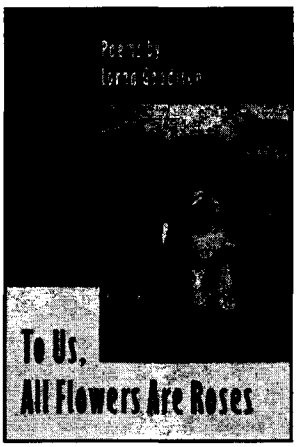

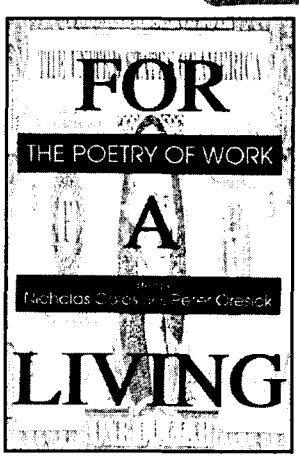

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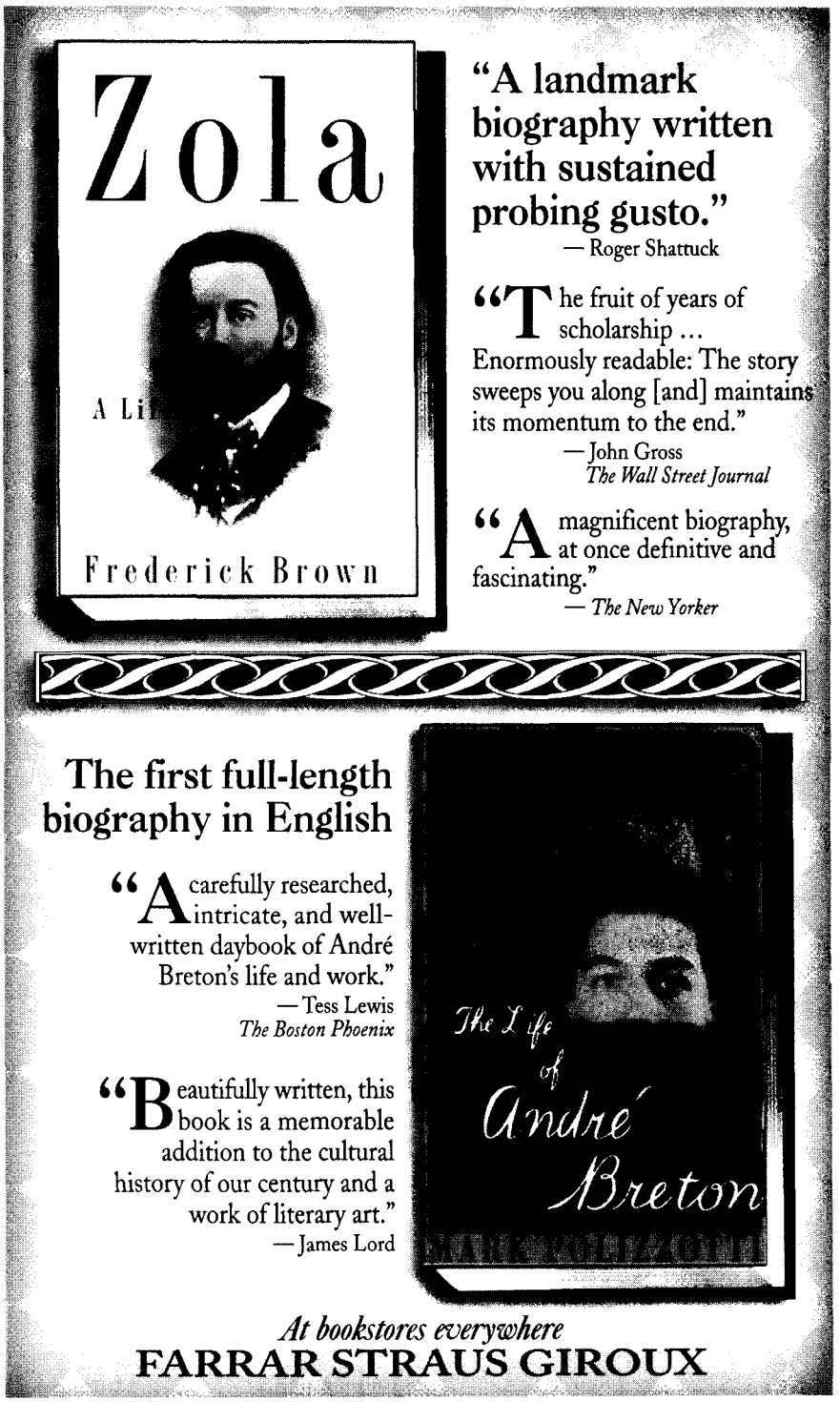
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JOSEPH EPSTEIN

The Pleasures of Reading

Five or six years ago, I was informed by my literary agent that two of my books were to be recorded by a firm called Books on Tape. Although the advance was not such as to earn me an honorable discharge from the financial wars, this was nonetheless pleasing news. Five or six months later, two smallish boxes arrived with the actual tapes. Ah, thought I, now here is a scrumptious little snack for the ego. I shall play these tapes in my car as I drive around Chicago, or on the Indiana Tollway, or up the Pacific Coast Highway. How soothing, how delicious the prospect, driving along and listening to that most amusing of people, oneself, or at least one's own thoughts. Wasn't it Philip Larkin who said that sex was altogether too good to share with anyone else? Listening to oneself on tape seemed the literary equivalent of Larkin's sentiment. Onan, I'm phonin', dear boy, to say you don't know the half of it. Or so I had supposed.

When I slipped my first tape into the tape player in my car, waiting for the lush cascade of words—my words, every last darling one among them—I was aquiver with anticipation. Cutting now directly to the chase, allow me to tell you that I didn't end up wrapped round a telephone pole, a silly grin of ecstasy on my face. No, I never made it through the first tape—I never made it, in fact, through even the first five minutes of the first tape. As it turned out, the man assigned to record my books had an odd, slightly twerpy accent; his rhythms were not mine; and listening to him rattle on, rolling obliviously over my careful punctuation—all this was more than I felt I could take.

I have since had four other of my books recorded on Books on Tape. The most recent of these has been a book of short stories, which contains ten or twelve Yiddish words that the (I assume under-employed) actor hired by Books on Tape, in his conscientiousness, actually called to get official pronunciations of—such words as: *mishagoss, nurishkeit, mishpacha.* But I found I could not

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listen to these tapes, either. I didn't even open the boxes in which they arrived. What is going on here? I know lots of intelligent people who listen to books on tape with intellectual profit and simple amusement. Why can't I?

Before getting round to an answer, let me go on to a further confession: I cannot read detective or spy fiction. It is not that, along with Edmund Wilson, I don't care who killed Roger Ackroyd—though I guess, deep down, I really don't care all that much—but that I just don't care to read about it. It is not my immitigable highbrowism, for my highbrowism turns out to be pretty easily mitigated. I don't in the least mind watching detective or spy stories in the movies or on television. Some of the best Hollywood movies—*Double Indemnity, The Maltese Falcon, Farewell, My Lovely, The Day of the Jackal*—have been detective and spy stories, with the rest probably westerns; and while I wouldn't think to read a Tom Clancy novel, at my regular evening post as couch potato I find I am able to watch VCR versions of his movies and feel, as is nowadays said, hey, no pain whatsoever. I just can't bear to read the stuff.

The problem for me is that reading is I won't say a sacred but nevertheless a pretty serious act. A very sensual act it is, too. I take account of the look, feel, even smell of a book. I like, or feel uncomfortable with, its heft in my hand. In reading, pace means a great deal, and one of the good things about a book, as opposed to a tape, is that you can read it at your own pace: flying on by, stopping, re-reading, even nodding, nodding more frequently, till—*ka-boom*—the book drops from your hand.

I read, for the most part, very slowly. The very notion of speed-reading is repugnant to me. ("Read *Anna Karenina* last night," an old joke about speed-reading has it. "A book set in Russia, isn't it?") The better the book, the more slowly I tend to read it. The older I get, also the more slowly I read—not so much because my mental faculties begin to break down, which I'm sure they do, but because I am no longer so confident, as when younger I was, that I have a respectable chance of returning to re-read the book in my hand. Besides, the notion of speed-reading is doubly repugnant for speeding up a pleasure. If speed-reading were really to catch on, can speed-eating be far behind? Let us not speak of other pleasurable activities.

In a brief piece in *The New Yorker* of this past spring, Benjamin

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Cheever, a great devotee of listening to books on tape, recounts that he not only listens to books on a tape player in his car but walks around the house wearing a Walkman "so that I can listen to a book while I run, rinse the dishes, make coffee, or shave." I myself rarely leave the house without a book, and I have been known to read a few paragraphs in the elevator in our building, or possibly finish a page or two while in line at the bank, and even catch a quick paragraph in my car at a longish stoplight. But whenever, or wherever I read, I need a pencil nearby to make my inevitable sideline of something I consider important, or plan to return to, or need to look up. I sometimes copy out things from books I am reading in a commonplace book I keep. I cannot depart from a book until I have a distinct sense of my place, and usually prefer not to cease reading until I arrive at the beginning of the first full paragraph on the left-hand page. You may think me very anal, but I need to observe all these little idiosyncrasies. ("Anality!" a character in an English novel exclaims when accused of it. "Anality—my ass!")

Being a writer also makes me a slower reader. Anyone—and I exclude only Ludwig Wittgenstein from this proposition—who reads a sentence has to make the following little check on it: 1. Is it clear? 2. Is it (grammatically, semantically, logically) correct? 3. Is it interesting? 4. Is it true? 5. Is it (charming bonus) beautiful? And then, if he or she is a writer, three further questions arise: 1. How was it made? 2. Could it be improved? and 3. What, for my own writing, can I steal from it? I have never met a good writer who wasn't also a penetrating reader; and every good writer, with varying degrees of consciousness and subtlety, is also a plagiarist.

Shocking to report, closing in on sixty, I still do not know all the words in the English language. The other morning I was reading Owen Chadwick's fine book *Britain and the Vatican during the Second World War* and came upon Chadwick's description of Myron Taylor, President Roosevelt's personal envoy to Pope Pius XII, as "rhadamanthine." It bugs me not to know a word. I am content not to know the meaning of the universe, or why God sent sin or suffering into the world, but not to know what a word means is beyond my tolerance. I trust you will think me on this matter altogether too rhadamanthine, which is to say, severe, or strict, coming from the judge Rhadamanthus in Hades in Greek mythology. But there it is, a tic, and I am stuck with it.

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I am also stuck, though at last becoming slowly unstuck, with the notion of finishing any book I begin and of reading every blasted word of it. I was pleased, some years ago, to discover that Justice Holmes, a wonderfully penetrating reader of excellent taste, suffered the same affliction until the age of seventy-five. Behind this was Holmes's worry that, at the gates of heaven, St. Peter would quiz him about his reading, and he didn't want to be caught saying he had read a book that he hadn't really finished. I read this in one of the collections of Justice Holmes's letters, of all of which, take my word on it, I have read every word.

I have at long last arrived at the age of skimming, which I still don't do with an altogether clear conscience. But why, I now tell myself, should I suffer painful *longueurs* in novels, too-lengthy plot summaries in biographies of novelists, long quotations from third-rate sources. I may be beautiful, as the blues song has it, but I'm goin' to die someday, and, I now say to myself, how 'bout some better readin', before I pass away.

The notion that, *mirabile dictu*, I am going to die someday, now all too realistic, makes me more cautious in what I choose to read. I am handed an eight-hundred-page biography and am now forced to consider that reading such a book entails at least two weeks out of my reading life. Do I wish to make the investment? Suddenly this has become a fairly serious question.

Gertrude Stein said that the happiest moment of her life was that moment in which she realized that she wouldn't be able to read all the books in the world. I suppose what made it happy for her was that it took off a fair amount of pressure. I have finally come to the realization that I shan't be able to read even all the good books in the world, and, far from making me happy, it leaves me, a naturally acquisitive fellow, a little sad. It does make rather more pressing, once one grants a world of limited possibilities, the question of which books one ought to read and which exclude.

The late Alexander Gershenkron, an economic historian at Harvard, once took up the matter of how much one can read in a lifetime, and with rather depressing statistical consequences. Gershenkron was then near seventy, and he estimated that, in his adult life, which he felt began at the age of twenty, he read roughly two books (outside of his professional reading) a week. This meant that, over fifty years of reading, one will have read

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only five thousand or so books. A piddling sum, when one realizes that something like fifty-five thousand books are published annually in the United States alone.

Given this daunting logistical problem, Gershenkron, in an essay in *The American Scholar*, remarked that it is a shame to have read too many of the wrong books, and so set out to discover criteria for establishing which are the right—or best—books. He arrived at three criteria, and these are: 1. a book should be intrinsically interesting; 2. a book should be re-readable; and 3. a book should be memorable. These criteria are thoughtful, impeccable, and, as by now you may have noticed, utterly useless. How, after all, can one know if a book is interesting until one has read well into it, or re-readable until one has read it through a second time, or memorable until long after one has finished reading it? One can't.

Advice about books has always been plentiful. The more practical the better I like it. The *Wall Street Journal* columnist Irving Kristol used to tell students at the NYU Business School never to show up for a job interview carrying a novel, which seems to me very sound advice, unless you happen to be interviewing for the job of literary critic or novelist. The late Arnaldo Momigliano, the great historian of the ancient world, once told me, in his strong Piedmontese accent, "You know, the cheapest way to acquire a book remains to buy it." I puzzled over that for an hour or two, before figuring out that what Arnaldo meant was that if you bought a book, rather than have it given or lent to you, at least you weren't under any obligation to read the damn thing.

Perhaps in America, where cultural confidence has always been a bit shaky, advice about what one ought to read has also been especially plentiful. As early as 1771, a man named Robert Skipwith, who was to be Mrs. Jefferson's brother-in-law, asked the then twenty-eight-year-old Thomas Jefferson to draw up a list of books "suited to the capacity of a common reader who understands but little of the classicks and who has not leisure for any intricate or tedious study. Let them [these books] be improving and amusing." Jefferson obliged with a list of 148 books, mostly in the classics but with a few intensely practical works, among them a book on horse-hoeing husbandry and Nourse's *Compendium of Physic and Surgery.*

The flow of such advice since has never ceased. There was

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Harvard's once famous five-foot shelf of classics and, later, Encylopaedia Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World.* In the early 1980s, a book was published titled *The List of Books: A Library of Over 3,000 Works.* By the time it was published, of course, the list was dated, being filled with books of that day on politics and popular culture: instructing one on the importance of the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, the Vietnam history of Frances Fitzgerald, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth,* and other books that one now turns away from at the asking price of 25 cents at garage sales.

No one, I fear, can offer much useful advice on what you ought to read, apart from making the important distinction between serious and unserious books. I once suggested in an essay that certain books were age specific—that is, that certain books ought or ought not to be read before or beyond certain ages: no Thomas Wolfe after eighteen; no F. Scott Fitzgerald beyond thirty, no Chekhov before thirty; no Proust before forty; no James Joyce beyond fifty—that sort of thing. Perhaps the best and only worthwhile distinction is that made by a character in an R. K. Narayan novel, who divided his personal library into good books and bad. In mystical fact, books have a mysterious, unpatterned way of appearing when one needs them. Or so at least they have in my life.

I grew up in an almost entirely unbookish home. Although neither of my parents was an immigrant, and both were well-spoken, I don't remember there being an English dictionary in our apartment. Magazines and newspapers were around in plenty. Only two books were kept, these in many copies, and both were stored in the basement. These were books written by my grandfather, in Yiddish and Hebrew, published in Montreal, where he lived, and subsidized in good part by my father. Whenever someone visited us who read Hebrew or Yiddish, I was instructed to run down to the basement to supply him or her with one of my grandfather's seemingly never diminishing stock of books.

I mention all this even though it does a bit of damage to one of the more pleasing stereotypes about Jews—that they are all bookish, artistic, sensitive, intellectual, born with something I can only call a culture gene. I grew up in a mostly Jewish neighborhood in which this gene seems never to have shown up. None of my boyhood friends was a reader, and neither was I. None of us

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played the piano, and certainly not the violin, that Jewish instrument *par excellence.* What we played were American sports, and what we yearned to be was wise in the ways of the modern city. The sons of moderately successful businessmen, we were adolescent gamblers and artful dodgers who hoped to grow into savvy men over whose eyes no one could pull the wool (make that cashmere).

Lonely children, or at least lonely boys, read books, and I was never lonely. A story is told about Edmund Wilson, whose mother worried that her son spent altogether too much time with books, and so bought him a baseball uniform and glove—in which the young Wilson suited up and promptly sat under a tree in the family's yard in Red Bank, New Jersey, where he continued reading. If my mother, going in the opposite route from Mrs. Wilson, had given me a set of books, I should probably have used them as bases and to mark the foul lines.

When a boy I read a book or two—*Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates, Black Beauty*—but for the most part my reading consisted of comic books and a publication still in circulation called *Sport Magazine.* When it came time to give book reports, I cheated by giving them from Classic Comics. When we were in, I believe, the fifth grade, a woman from the Chicago Public Library visited our school and, in a treacly accent, told us, "Boys and girls, *boooks* are your friends. They will take you to unknown shores and reveal to you hitherto hidden treasures. Yes, boys and girls, *boooks* truly are your friends, so you must never bend their backs or write in their margins or dog-ear their pages." This most impressive little talk put me off serious book reading for at least another full five years.

I have since come not only to agree with the library lady, to whom I owe an apology, but to go a step further with Marcel Proust, who in his essay "On Reading" claims, with some justification, that books, at least as company, are really superior to friends. One need engage in no small talk with a book, as Proust noted, no greetings in the hall, no expressions of gratitude, or excuses for delayed meetings. With books, unlike with friends, no sense of obligation exists. We are with them only because we absolutely wish to be with them. Nor do we have to laugh, politely, at their attempts at wit. As Proust says, "No more deference: we laugh at what Molière says only to the degree that we find him funny; when he bores us, we are not afraid to appear bored, and

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when we decidedly have had enough of being with him, we put him back in his place as bluntly as if he had neither genius nor fame."

We may even, in extreme conditions, and contra the library lady, break the back and dog-ear the hell out of a book, which we certainly cannot do to friends. Besides, as you cannot with a friend, you can deal with a book at the pace you prefer: maundering, skimming, or plowing straight through. You can argue with a book, or even curse it, and not have to worry about being put down by a superior mind. (An Evanston bookseller once told me that he was much amused with a book that came into his shop that contained, in the margins of one of its pages, the remark, "C'mon, Ortega!")

The first book that really, that deeply, engaged my interest arrived when I was thirteen. It had a thick red cover, trimmed in black, and was titled *All-American.* It was written by a man named John R. Tunis, and was, as I had hoped it would be, about football—high-school football. It was illustrated by a man named Hans Walleen, had a protagonist named Meyer Goldman, a Jewish halfback (anti-Semitism was part of the story), and was so immensely readable that I lapped up its 250 fairly large-print pages in a single day. As we should say nowadays, it blew me away.

How to recover what Marcel Proust calls the original psychological act of reading? I am not sure I can do it justice. I remember being swept up in John R. Tunis' story. I remember pulling for characters—wanting them to win through. I remember wanting to rush to the end of the story, to make sure it ended in a victory for goodness, fairness, and decency (not to worry, it did). At the same time that I wanted to know how things worked out, I didn't really want the book to end and so to be ejected from this swell world that John R. Tunis had created.

All-American did something that not many other things I had thus far encountered in life were able to do—it took me out of myself and put me into a larger world. Not all that much larger, now that I come to think about it, but larger enough to stir my imagination. Even the details of reading the book return to me, forty-five years later. I read part of it in our living room, and finished it, supine, propped up on my bed, on top of the spread, leaning on my right elbow.

I can remember the conditions surrounding the reading of lots

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of books that had a strong effect on me as a boy. I remember sitting up all night, in the bed next to which my father slept in the Brown Hotel in Des Moines, Iowa, where at sixteen I had gone with him on business, to finish Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door*; I remember sitting, legs crossed Indian style, reading John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* in a park called Indian Boundary on the northside of Chicago. I remember reading *Catcher in the Rye* on a train headed for Champaign, Illinois. Oddly, I don't remember the conditions under which I read *The Grapes of Wrath*, another key book for me in my youth.

All of these books I read with no sense of their quality or place in the general hierarchy of critical importance, for these things, pleasant to report, had not yet any meaning for me; these books excited me because they seemed to take hold of life, and consequently they took hold of me.

Proust, that brilliant anatomist of passion, recalled everything about his own reading experience, about which he reports both in *Remembrance of Things Past* and in "On Reading." Characteristically, he laments the passing of the intense pleasure that his boyish reading gave him. Reporting on his emotions upon the completion of a book, he writes:

> Then, what? This book, it was nothing but that? Those beings [its characters] to whom one had given more of one's attention and tenderness than to people in real life, not always daring to admit how much one loved them, even when our parents found us reading and appeared to smile at our emotions, so that we closed the book with affected indifference or feigned ennui; those people, for whom one had panted and sobbed, one would never see again, one would no longer know anything about them.

"How do you manage to know so many things, Monsieur France?" Proust is supposed to have asked Anatole France, to which the older writer is said to have replied: "It's quite simple, my dear Marcel. When I was your age, I wasn't good-looking and popular like you. So instead of going into society I stayed at home and did nothing but read." Later in life, given a choice, would Marcel have preferred going to a party or staying home with a book? It would depend, I suppose he might have answered, on who was giving the party and whether certain duchesses would be there. And of course much later in life, he preferred to stay home

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to write a book that has kept many of us at home reading it for weeks on end.

I ought to have known that I was in danger of being seriously hooked on books and the pleasures of reading when, one sunny summer afternoon in my fourteenth year, I stayed home to read another John R. Tunis novel, this one about baseball. When I could as easily have been outside playing the game, I preferred at that moment to continue reading about it. A bookworm, clearly, was in the making.

Still, the hook took a while to sink in. I read scarcely at all in high school, and then mainly books about the slums. *The Amboy Dukes* by Irving Schulman, a novel about a bunch of thuggish kids in Brooklyn, was a much thumbed book in my high school. In print—in actual print in those happily prudish times—it used the word "jugs" to refer to a girl's breasts. I read other books in this general line of hoods in the slums books, including one actually called *The Hoods*, by a man named Harry Grey, from which, owing to the perverse games that memory chooses to play, I still recall the sentence, "Cockeyed Hymie at the wheel, the big boat pulled into the night and I thrilled to the sensation of the clutch."

Although I was never a good student, the University of Chicago did teach me which were the important books. I was, though, pleased to depart that exalted setting so that I might read, alongside all those great books, a number of merely good ones, of my own choosing and to be read in my own unsystematic way. My own unsystematic way included a few key motives, among them reading to discover what life was supposed to be like and how one was supposed to live it. "Genius," wrote Henry James, "is only the art of getting your experience fast, of stealing it, as it were." I hoped to steal a lot of experience from books, and believe I may have done so. Then, too, the question implicit in reading every great writer, or so I began to sense, is, What would he or she have thought of me? Reading a serious book, it turns out, provides a way of reconsidering one's own life from the author's perspective.

I have never clocked myself here, but my guess is that rare is the day that I do not spend anywhere from three to five hours reading. Apart from ablutions and making coffee, reading is the first thing I do in the morning and generally the last thing I do at night. I once tried to go a day without reading and found it compared in difficulty of deprivation with going a day without

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smoking; and I speak as a former two-pack-a-day man. My children seem to recall the most repeated phrase from their growing up with me as their father being, "One moment: I'll be with you as soon as I finish this paragraph." Whenever I am abroad, in no matter how exotic the city—Athens, Constantinople, Jerusalem—at some point I yearn to stay the day in the hotel room and do nothing but read.

I am always amused to note, when the *New York Times* prints one of its Man or Woman in the News pieces, one of these men or women listing under hobbies such items as "Tennis, Travel, *Reading*." The notion of reading as a hobby to one for whom it is very nearly a way of life is comically absurd. With any luck at all, I shall never be the Man in the News, but if I am, I should as readily list under my hobbies, "Tennis, Travel, and *Breathing*." Hilton Kramer, another voracious reader, has more than once remarked of certain jobs—in government, as directors of large museums and other cultural institutions, as presidents of universities—that they are among those jobs "which never allow you to read another book." A poet, a Russian proverb has it, always cheats his boss. A really serious reader, a proverb I have invented for this occasion, is probably better off not being a boss.

I don't wish to make my own reading seem grim, a lonely quest for wisdom, a form of psychotherapy by other (and less expensive) means, onward ever onward, beating on, boats against the current, working in the dark, my passion my task . . . and the rest of it. On the contrary. My motives in reading are thoroughly mixed, but pure pleasure is always high among them. I read for aesthetic pleasure. If anything, with the passing of years, I have become sufficiently the aesthetic snob so that I can scarcely drag my eyes across the pages of a badly or even pedestrianly written book. I count myself one of Henry James's little band, "partakers of the same repose, who sit together in the shade of the tree, by the plash of the fountain, with the glare of the desert around us and no great vice that I know of but the habit perhaps of estimating people a little too much by what they think of a certain style." Along with the love of style, I read in the hope of laughter, exaltation, insight, enhanced consciousness, and dare I say it, *wisdom*; I read, finally, hoping to get a little smarter about the world.

Such are my hopes. But what, exactly, do I actually get out of

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this activity on which I spend three to five hours daily? What is the point? I explain to my students that I by now have probably forgotten more than they have read—a remark made not in a spirit of braggadocio but in literal truth and true regret. There are whole—and entirely serious—novels I have read about which I cannot recall a thing. One such is Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot.* All I can tell you about that thick book is that its protagonist is a man named Prince Myshkin, he is an epileptic, and, in ways I cannot recall, somehow wise in his innocence. Otherwise: total blank, nada, zilch. Read *The Idiot* roughly thirty years ago—a novel set in Russia, isn't it?

Plots do not stay all that long in my mind. I do not, as a previous generation did, memorize vast stretches of poetry. What I consciously take away from many of the books I read are scenes, oddments, bits and pieces. I am somehow less interested in the final meaning of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" than I am in the fact that so many of the phrases from that poem have stuck in my mind for more than forty years. From an Isaac Bashevis Singer story, I recall the earlock of a yeshiva student, flapping in the wind; I remember the little finger of Father Sergius, in Tolstoy's story of that name, twirling in the air after he has chopped it off in his struggle to hold sensuality at bay; I remember the hero of one of Henry Miller's novels—one of the *Tropics*—making love standing up in a hallway in Paris when a coin drops from his companion's purse and the Miller narrator remarks to himself, "I made a mental note to pick it up later"; in Owen Chadwick's *Britain and the Vatican during the Second World War,* I already suspect that, in the years to come, I shall only recall the diary entry of the British envoy to the Vatican, D'Arcy Osborne, who, unable to leave the Vatican while Italy was at war with England, noted: "I reached the grave conclusion during the mass that I am nothing but a pencilled marginal note in the Book of Life. I am not in the main text at all."

Reading is always at its best for me when the writer makes of it a sheath of words with which to capture the rich, unpredictable, astonishing flow of life. The metaphor of the sheath comes from Willa Cather, who in *The Song of the Lark* has her opera-singer-heroine Thea Kronborg, while standing in a stream in the pueblo country, reflect: ". . . what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining,

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elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?"

Not only am I unclear about what the main text of the Book of Life is, but I am not always entirely sure what the main texts of actual books are. Am I, I wonder, insufficiently interested in such ideas as works of literature may be said to contain? There are those, and I am among them, who claim that, when it is going at its best, literature sails above the realm of ideas anyhow.

"He had a mind so fine no idea could violate it," said T. S. Eliot of Henry James. By that lovely rhythmic formulation I take Eliot to mean not that James was incapable of grasping or of functioning at the level of ideas, but instead that his true interest was elsewhere. James, Eliot is saying, was not interested in the knowledge contained in the various ideas or "isms" of literature, but in the truths known to the human heart and soul, the truths of sensibility—interested, that is, in what for the artist are the higher truths.

T. S. Eliot, at the age of thirty, writing to his friend Mary Hutchinson, allowed that there were two ways in which one ought to read: "1) because of particular and personal interest, which makes the thing one's own, regardless of what other people think of the book, 2) *to a certain extent*, because it is something that one 'ought to have read'—but one must be quite clear that this is *why* one is reading." Eliot goes on to say that, apropos of reading, there are two kinds of intelligence: "the intellectual and the sensitive—the first can read a great deal because it schematises and theorizes—the second not much, because it requires one to get more out of a book than can immediately be put into words." He then adds that "*I* read very little—and *have* read much less than people think—at present I only read Tudor drama, Tudor prose, and Gibbon—over and over—when I have time to read at all. Of course I don't count the countless books I have to skim for lectures, etc."

Marguerite Yourcenar said that there were three sources of knowledge in the world: that knowledge which comes from observing fellow human beings, that knowledge which comes from looking into one's heart, and that knowledge which comes from books. Is there any point in ranking the three according to importance? I suspect not. Not to observe others is to put oneself in danger in the world, not to observe oneself is to lose the

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permanent use of that un-named organ responsible for reflection, not to read is to risk barbarizing oneself—leave any one of the three out and you have a less than fully equipped human being.

I am not sure Marcel Proust would agree. He had strong notions about the limitations of reading. He thought reading especially useful to the indolent mind, which cannot think in solitude, but requires the lubrication of another, superior mind to set its own in thoughtful motion. My guess is that Proust thought his own a mind of this kind. I know my own is; if my thoughts are ever to catch fire, I need to rub them up against those of a finer grained mind than my own.

Proust thought that the true point of reading was to waken us to the life of the spirit. The danger in reading, he felt, was when it tended to substitute itself for this life of the spirit—when, as he wrote, "truth no longer appears to us as an ideal we can realize only through the intimate progress of our thought and the effort of our heart, but as a material thing, deposited between the leaves of books like honey ready-made by others, and which we have only to take the trouble of reaching for on the shelves of libraries and then savouring passively in perfect repose of body and mind."

Yet this danger, of substituting books for intelligence, Proust thought, grew less as intelligence grew greater. Once we knew that we could "develop the power of our sensibility and our intelligence only within ourselves, in the depths of our spiritual life," books become, as Proust calls it, "the noblest of distractions, the most ennobling one of all, for only reading and knowledge produce the 'good manners' of the mind."

I suppose one can accept Proust's strictures on the limitation of books, with this one qualification: how does the flame of intelligence grow greater without the substantial kindling of books to ignite it? Sometimes, too, more than mere intelligence is ignited by reading.

Consider, for example, the following scene: a very nervous young black man, not long up from Mississippi, appears at the desk of a branch library in the city of Memphis, Tennessee. He has forged a note, asking the librarian to give him some of the books of H. L. Mencken, an author whose name he had come across in that morning's paper. (It is the late 1920s, and the

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reason the note has to be forged is that blacks are not allowed to use the Memphis public library.) After a very nervous-making exchange, the young black man, whose name happens to be Richard Wright, is given two Mencken titles: one of these is *A Book of Prefaces.* Wright, in *Black Boy,* his autobiography, provides an account of the effect of his reading H. L. Mencken for the first time:

> That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the sink, I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weakness of people, mocking God, authority. What was this? I stood up, trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of the words. . . . Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? No. It frightened me. I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it.

Richard Wright continues:

> I ran across many words whose meaning I did not know, and I either looked them up in a dictionary or, before I had a chance to do that, encountered the word in a context that made its meaning clear. But what strange world was this? I concluded the book with the conviction that I had somehow overlooked something terribly important in life. I had once tried to write, had once reveled in feeling, had let my crude imagination roam, but the impulse to dream had been slowly beaten out of me by experience. Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the world look different.

Let me italicize Richard Wright's phrase *the impulse to dream,* which, he says, "had been beaten out of me." At times, much less brutally than in ways the young Richard Wright had to undergo I grant you, life beats it out of all of us. And books, "that noblest distraction," can replace it, sometimes in direct, sometimes in subtle ways.

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Because I was born into a family with a strong practical cast, which I cannot shake off, nor want to, I have to ask myself what does all my reading mean? What does it come to? Again I ask: What is the point of spending so much time, on my duff, a book in my hand, reading vast quantities of lovely prose and poetry, much of which I shall probably forget?

I have asked this same question of my students. For the better part of four years, I say to them, you have read a mass of poems, plays, novels—what does it all come down to? Their answers, though not unintelligent, are a bit predictable. All this reading sharpens their minds, they say; it tends to put them in touch with noble ideals; it lets them experience things that, without books, they could never experience (the eighteenth century, for example). All these answers, though a mite platitudinous, are nevertheless correct. I have the advantage over them of at least making a living off all my reading. But does all their reading come together, does it add up to something at least philosophically if not commercially useful? Is there, in the impatient phrase of the day, a bottom line? Here, in searching for an answer, they stumble. I'm sure I couldn't have answered it myself at twenty or twenty-one, but I should like to attempt to do so now.

A fair amount of reading, of a belletristic kind, I have come to believe, confers on one—or at least ought to confer on one—what I think of as "the literary point of view." This point of view, which is taught not by any specific book or author, or even set of authors, teaches a worldly-wise skepticism, which comes through first in a distrust of general ideas. "As soon as one creates a concept," says Ortega, "reality leaves the room." (Right on, Ortega! I hope someone will write in the margin of this essay.) The literary point of view is distrustful of general ideas and above all of systems of ideas. It teaches, as Henry James advises, that you should "never say that you know the last word about any human heart." It teaches one to hold with Chekhov, who favored no sides or classes but wrote: "I believe in individuals, I see salvation in isolated personalities scattered here and there throughout Russia; whether they're intellectuals or peasants, they are our strength, few of them though there are."

The most complex lesson the literary point of view teaches—and it is not, to be sure, a lesson available to all, and is even difficult to keep in mind once acquired—is to allow the intellect

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to become subservient to the heart. What wide reading teaches is the richness, the complexity, the mystery of life. In the wider and longer view, I have come to believe, there is something deeply apolitical—something above politics—in literature, despite what feminist, Marxist, and other politicized literary critics may think. If at the end of a long life of reading the chief message you bring away is that women have had it lousy, or that capitalism stinks, or that attention must above all be paid to victims, then I'd say you just might have missed something crucial. Too bad, for there probably isn't time to go back to re-read your lifetime's allotment of 5,000 or so books.

People who have read with love and respect understand that the larger message behind all books, great and good and even some not so good as they might be, is, finally, cultivate your sensibility so that you may trust your heart. The charmingly ironic point of vast reading, at least as I have come to understand it, is to distrust much of one's education. Unfortunately, the only way to know this is first to become educated, just as the only way properly to despise success is first to achieve it.

Let me return and give all but the last word to Marcel Proust, who wrote:

> Our intellect is not the most subtle, the most powerful, the most appropriate instrument for revealing the truth. It is life that, little by little, example by example, permits us to see that what is most important to our heart, or to our mind, is learned not by reasoning, but through other agencies. Then it is that the intellect, observing their superiority, abdicates its control to them upon reasoned grounds and agrees to become their collaborator and lackey.

That seems to me impressively subtle, immensely smart, very wise. I came upon it, you may not be astonished to learn, in a book.

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DAVID MASON

The Poetry of Life and the Life of Poetry

It's like a book, I think, this bloomin' world. . . .
—Rudyard Kipling

1. Forms of Memory

I owe my existence to the Japanese Imperial Army. Not in the way you might be guessing—the incident I am about to relate happened a decade before I was born, and my mother was safely tucked away in a California college for women.

It happened to my father at twenty-four, a red-haired Naval Lieutenant on the bridge of a destroyer, the USS *Terry*, patrolling the waters off Iwo Jima. You know about the famous battle there, five weeks of the bloodiest conflict imaginable—unimaginable, in fact, the stories numbing a listener, the storytellers so physically or psychologically wounded that sometimes they can hardly bear their own survival. Compared to the Marines on the island, who often fought hand-to-hand against the Japanese, my father's position at sea was, I suppose, relatively safe. He never spoke of this when I was growing up. Now in his seventies, he tells the story as if it can't be suppressed any longer, as if he too can't believe he survived.

In daytime the destroyers usually lay off the southeast shore of Iwo Jima, bombarding targets radioed to them by Marine spotters. On this particular night they were sent to protect supply ships moving away from the island. The crew, at battle stations all night, had evaded a torpedo dropped from one of the Japanese planes that scouted them. As dawn came, the destroyers were ordered back to their daytime stations. While the Captain and crew tried to sleep, my father, Officer of the Deck, took the ship down the northeast side of the island several miles from shore.

He couldn't have known the enemy had hidden heavy artillery in caves on the island. These were British coastal guns captured at Singapore, mounted on rails so they could be wheeled out, fired,

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and wheeled back into their caves before invaders detected their location. Years later I listened to my father converse with a man who had been an artillery officer in the Canadian Army. This friend described the noise made by these big British guns, and my father said, "I know that noise. I've been shot at by them."

The first shells fired from the island at the *Terry* exploded in a huge geyser just off the bow. My father ordered a zigzag course away from the island and wakened the Captain, who then took charge as my father ran to his post on the gun-director turret. He had hardly reached it when they were hit—WHAM—smack in the middle of the ship. All electrical circuits went out at once and the five-inch guns were left to fire at the shore as best they could.

"Blood all over the place," my father said. He was okay, but he felt stunned and helpless. Everywhere there were young boys killed or missing body parts. As if God had made a fist and brought it down amidships. A lot of boys had been alive, and suddenly they were in pieces. The dying or seriously wounded were more than the doctor and the one uninjured corpsman could handle. The engine rooms were flooded and the *Terry* lay dead in the water until other ships came to take her in tow.

The memory of dead and wounded boys has never left my father; it may have contributed to his decision after the war to become a doctor. He could not talk about it for years. He mistrusted the words, or the impact they might have on him or us if he tried to describe it all, especially his own questions about whether he had set the ship on the best course that morning. But the truth is that nobody had known about the hidden guns.

For the *Terry* the battle of Iwo Jima had ended. They were going home, which meant they would miss the dreaded invasion of Japan. Not all of them made it, however. My father's Gunnery Officer friend received a transfer to another destroyer headed for Okinawa. He remembers the young man's grief at the news; as his eyes filled with tears he had said, "I know I'll never see my wife again."

Whenever I hear that part of the story I think of the movies. You know what will happen next. The guy who takes out the photo of his wife or girlfriend is always the guy who gets killed in the next battle. We've watched it happen so often that we can hardly believe it any more. But life is sometimes full of clichés. You don't have to believe in fate to say that so-and-so was fated to die in such and such a way. Even as I write this I wonder: Am I telling you the

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story, or merely transcribing a version of some war story that has happened many times over? Do I give form to the tale, or do I uncover a form that is already there? Fated or not, this young officer was killed instantly by a *kamikaze* when it crashed into the bridge of his new ship.

My father and the *Terry* were spared the *kamikazes*. They limped home to the United States for a period of recovery. At a dance near San Francisco my father and mother met—so you can see how I owe my existence to the Japanese Imperial Army. If they had not captured the British guns at Singapore and shipped them to Iwo Jima with its ant farm of caves and opened fire on the USS *Terry*, my brothers and I would never have been born.

This story, it often seems to me, has an inherent form; the teller only uncovers it. We say that life is full of ironies, which we discover by looking back, even looking back only a moment or two. But do we live the plots of stories already told? Do the seasons and planets rhyme? Perhaps these are idle questions. Everyone knows that life is formless and that art is not. Even the most chaotic painting has a frame around it, but who are we to say that birth and death are the frame around our lives? We assume that life is chaos. Our usual metaphors are a wilderness, a wind-tossed sea, a jungle with or without sidewalks. And so it seems. We see through a glass, darkly. We call art, as Robert Frost called poetry, "a momentary stay against confusion."

But to say that we do not always perceive a form is not proof that no form exists. Our greatest pleasures often derive from form—the feeling of connection, completion, touch. It seems that the mind naturally rejects formlessness. As John Frederick Nims has written, "The word *form* has a variety of meanings, some of them antipodal. For the philosophers *forma* can mean *soul*, the in*form*ing principle that animates whatever is alive and organizes whatever is not. But for most writers *form* is more likely to mean *body* than *soul*. . . ." Whether we create form or merely perceive its immanence in nature, or both, I cannot say. But I can at least explore some of those moments when life seems to have a shape, when it seems poetic, and compare them to the life of poetry, the routine devotion to its pleasures.

I have sometimes felt that I was part of a story, and that I had a sacred duty to transcribe as much of it as I could. My story has something to do with my father's war. In 1974 I unloaded fishing

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boats for six months in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, which, as it happens, had been bombed by the Japanese in World War II. Dutch Harbor was still a little-known outpost not quite halfway out the Aleutian Chain. When I lived there it was an empty place, ghostly, its weather usually dreary like a sodden blanket. The hills were utterly bare, like Hebridean moors, and one could see spent volcanos on the island of Unalaska. Everywhere there were empty buildings: Quonset huts and old wooden barracks weathered silver. There were broken concrete bunkers, rusty trucks half-buried on the beaches, miles of oxidized copper wire running through the weedy tundra. These were the ruins of a World War II military base. I have known several men who served there during the war. They shudder when they recall the horizontal rain, the steady boredom, the horror of Attu—a smaller Iwo Jima—and not one of them has ever expressed to me a desire to return to that place.

My own memories are not so hellish, and with good reason. In 1974 we had finished our latest war and had only Watergate to worry about. But I do remember the ruins: the old prison camp, the officers' quarters. Dutch Harbor was a sort of garbage dump of World War II, a scavenger's paradise. I thought of it as my essential landscape—the desolate home of all literal and figurative war babies, the off-center eye of history's storm.

Derek Walcott, who grew up on another isolated island far to the south, has said that "The sigh of history rises over ruins, not over landscapes. . . ." That is not entirely true. Sometimes the landscape is the ruined temple. Sometimes it is the battlefield. In South Dakota, for example, you can still see the shallow ravine at Wounded Knee where the Seventh Cavalry slaughtered three hundred Sioux. There is a wooden sign on which the word "Battle" has been replaced by the word "Massacre." There is a graveyard with a small monument. But the landscape is haunted too. The story lives in the grass and the lay of the land.

I felt that way about Dutch Harbor. Walking far from the ghost town of old barracks, I still felt the presence of history like some aboriginal songline. Unalaska's Church of the Holy Ascension attests to the Russian conquerers and their God, but so does the distant, snowy volcano with its Russian name. It wasn't only the buildings that told these stories. It was the hills, and the cold inhumanity, the luster and boredom of the sea.

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2. The Old Philosophers

Theorists who hold life and art completely separate are killing the thing they supposedly love. The word "text" as it is used by many critics now fills me with anger, because it so often reduces history or literature to a system of arbitrary codes, interpretations rather than events. By contrast, even a philosophical poet like Wallace Stevens was clearly concerned with being in the world, noticing oranges and coffee as much as the poem about oranges and coffee. Yes, the poem about the orange is not the orange, but it influences our awareness of the orange. The sermon about death is not death, but the dead body is a fact beyond interpretation. In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates waxes wise about the life after death, adding that "no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them." Then he drinks the hemlock and dies slowly from the feet up. We may be aware that accounts of the death are open to interpretation, just as the dialogues of Plato subvert their own assertions by offering more than one voice. But the body is a fact beyond interpretation. History may be composed of texts, but it is also composed of dead and living bodies. Our interpretation of events is not the events themselves, and truth matters even when we doubt our ability to know it.

For Stevens, who successfully navigated the world of business yet enjoyed meditative walks or quiet moments alone in a New York cathedral, human existence was a symbiosis of the real and the imagined. In his beautiful lecture, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," delivered at Princeton in wartime, he speaks of "the pressure of reality," by which he particularly means the sort of catastrophic global events anyone could read about in the daily papers. The pressure was indeed great, as German, Italian and Japanese nationalists advanced on all fronts. Stevens felt that, in our society, the imagination was also losing ground to this "pressure of reality." The world of facts which he inhabited every day had little use for an imagined nobility.

Nobility, Stevens said, was a force, and imaginative activities like poetry were needed to keep it alive in the world:

> It is not an artifice that the mind has added to human nature. The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within

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> that protects us from the violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us live our lives.

This most reticent and philosophical of poets actually declared that poetry helps us live our lives! It is more than a closed system of interpretations. It speaks to us and in us. Sometimes it even ennobles us. It is a way of being in the world.

Of course, poetry is only one of the arts and only one kind of imaginative organization. But these activities have indeed been helpful, preserving some part of us even as we preserve them. The classical scholar Bernard Knox recalls a moment in World War II when poetry and life intersected for him. A member of the OSS who saw plenty of action, he found himself in 1944 fighting the Germans alongside Italian partisans in the mountains south of Modena. At one point, huddled in a ruined house under fire from a German machine gun, he picked up a copy of Virgil in the debris, "one of a series of classical texts issued by the Royal Italian Academy to celebrate the greatness of ancient (and modern) Rome; the title page bore the improbable heading, in Latin, IUSSU BENEDICTI MUSSOLINI—'By Order of Benito Mussolini.' " Knox tells this story in the introduction to his *Essays Ancient & Modern* by way of explaining his subsequent career as a scholar. Recalling that Virgil's poems had once been thought prophetic, he opened the book to a passage from the first Georgic, which he translates as follows:

> Here right and wrong are reversed; so many wars in the world, so many faces of evil. The plow is despised and rejected; the farmers marched off, the field untended. The curving sickles are beaten straight to make swords. On one side the East moves to war, on the other, Germany. Neighboring cities tear up their treaties and take to arms; the vicious war god rages the world over.

Knox's meditation on these words and the moment of finding them strikes me as a beautiful example of the poetry of life and the life of poetry:

> These lines, written thirty years before the birth of Christ, expressed, more directly and passionately than any modern statement I

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> know of, the reality of the world I was living in: the shell-pocked, mine-infested fields, the shattered cities and the starving population of that Italy Virgil so loved, the misery of the whole world at war. And there was in fact a sort of prophecy in it. "On one side the East moves to war." I did not know it yet, but the unit in which I served was to be selected for a role in the main Japanese landing, which was already in the planning stage. In this case, luckily for all of us, the Virgilian oracle was wrong.
>
> It was time to move up. I tried to get the book into one of my pockets, but it was too big and I threw it down. But as we ran and crawled through the rubble I thought to myself: "If I ever get out of this, I'm going back to the classics and study them seriously."

This full-time avocation, literature, has much to do with life as we live it, searching for our place in the narrative of humankind.

It may be that I am telling too many war stories here—especially for someone who, thankfully, has no experience of warfare. But these tales of extremity only confirm what I also feel about so-called ordinary life: that the world we imagine and the world we inhabit with our bodies are deeply related.

Now I recall the case of Patrick Leigh Fermor, the great English travel writer who lives in southern Greece. For a time I was his neighbor, my one-room hut sharing an edenic bay with his more spacious villa. I remember sitting in my doorway on a summer night while Fermor's opera recordings drifted to me over the olives and cypresses. The breeze off the mountains cooled me; the grating cicadas quit their racket when the sun went down. I had no electricity in that little house, so I read his books by lamplight, devouring everything he had written to impress him with my knowledge of it when we met. His prose was so rich that it made me hungry, and I actually had to eat bread and cheese while reading. His words increased my appetite for language and experience.

I was twenty-five years old; to me Fermor represented a literary ideal, the intellectual and physical life melded in one Byronic personality. Years later, while I plodded through graduate school, I frequently envied Fermor's alternative to a college education—in the early 1930s he had walked from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople (even the use of that name is fraught with historical significance). He was also legendary for his involvement with the Cretan resistance during World War II, having masterminded their kidnapping of Major-General Heinrich Kreipe, the

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commander of the German garrison. Fermor has never told the full story of these events, choosing instead to translate a Greek version by George Psychoundakis. But in *A Time of Gifts*, the first volume of his masterful travel-memoir, Fermor relates a story not unlike that of Bernard Knox:

> The hazards of war landed me among the crags of occupied Crete with a band of Cretan guerillas and a captive German general whom we had waylaid and carried off into the mountains three days before. The German garrison of the island were in hot, but luckily temporarily misdirected, chase. It was a time of anxiety and danger; and for our captive, of hardship and distress. During a lull in the pursuit, we woke up among the rocks just as a brilliant dawn was breaking over the crest of Mount Ida. We had been toiling over it, through snow and then rain, for the last two days. Looking across the valley at this flashing mountain-crest, the general murmured to himself:
>
> Vides ut alta stet nive candidum
> Soracte . . .
>
> It was one of the ones I knew! I continued from where he had left off:
>
> nec iam sustineant onus
> Silvae laborantes, geluque
> Flumina constiterint acuto,
>
> and so on, through the remaining five stanzas to the end. The general's blue eyes swivelled away from the mountain-top to mine—and when I'd finished, after a long silence, he said: "Ach so, Herr Major!" It was very strange. As though, for a long moment, the war had ceased to exist. We had both drunk at the same fountains long before; and things were different between us for the rest of our time together.

I remember arguing with a friend about this scene.[1] The friend thought it preposterous, declaring that a Hollywood cliché of

[1] Fermor quotes Horace's *Odes* (I. ix). Here is John Dryden's 1685 version of the stanza:

> Behold yon mountain's hoary height,
> Made higher with new amounts of snow;
> Again, behold the winter weight
> Oppress the laboring woods below;
> And streams with icy fetters bound
> Benumbed and cramped to solid ground.

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noble aristocracy had found its way into Fermor's memory, and then into his book. But I had ample opportunity to observe Fermor's recall of verse in several languages. It was another aspect of his character I had admired and tried to imitate. I also knew that, despite the objections of cynics, people do remember poems or songs or key phrases at surprising moments in life, as if pressing back against the pressure of reality.

Another soldier, Field-Marshal A.P. Wavell, demonstrated his prodigious memory for verse by collecting a 400-page anthology from memory. *Other Men's Flowers*, published in 1944, comprised only poems that Wavell had by heart. He acknowledged that his choices would seem old-fashioned to some, but the anthology does have its treasures, like the Kipling I quote at the beginning of this essay. My point about Wavell is that he was a practical man, a soldier whose 1916 wound cost him the sight in one eye, a masterful strategist whose 1941 book, *Generals and Generalship*, was read and re-read by Erwin Rommel, and finally, he was one of the last Viceroys of India. Yet this man needed poetry and knew that others needed it. *Other Men's Flowers* sold extremely well, and in his Preface to the revised edition Wavell paid homage to one of his readers:

> A tribute which I greatly valued came in the form of an annotated copy which a friend sent me. The annotations had been made by a soldier who read *Other Men's Flowers* during the period of his final training for D-Day in Normandy. As he read each poem he put the date on which and sometimes the circumstances in which he had read it; and added his comments of enjoyment, indifference or dislike. He had finished the volume while crossing to Normandy and had fallen in the battle shortly afterwards. I often turn up that copy and read the comments, which reveal a fine, somewhat puritan, character and shrewd judgment. I am proud that my selection should have helped him in those days, and that it was on the whole to his taste. I hope I may have helped and entertained many such others.

This poetry was not intended to be patriotic propaganda gearing the soldier's mind for war; it was intended to help and entertain. Though Wavell's choices would surely not meet the approval of most academic critics now, I find his anthology strangely moving because it was made by a man who believed in poetry's sustaining power. He knew that the best forms of expression are often those we want most to remember.

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Life appears on occasion to have form, to borrow its form from poetry even as poetry borrows from life. I return to Wallace Stevens, this time his wartime poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

> Soldier, there is a war between the mind
> And Sky, between thought and day and night. It is
> For that the poet is always in the sun,
>
> Patches the moon together in his room
> To his Virgilian cadences, up down,
> Up down. It is a war that never ends.
>
> Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.
> They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,
> Two parallels that meet if only in
>
> The meeting of their shadows or that meet
> In a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay.

Poetry needn't always refer to the world in a straightforward manner, just as the world is frequently not straightforward with us. The spell of nonsense is as important as the elegy or prayer. We can hope poetry that matters is remembered, brought into our lives out of need or pleasure. The pleasure in a line may not be universal, the need may be weaker than our need for water, but poetry has proven tenacious in its survival.

3. The Impersonal Poet

When I read poetry in college I was taught to be impersonal, always impersonal, as if to avoid contaminating what I read. Now it seems to me that the force of personality is every bit as important as the mastery of craft. Reading and writing are an invitation to a great untidy conversation that spans generations and cultures. The idea that we must be impersonal derives partly from T.S. Eliot, but did anyone ever really believe that Eliot was not present in his poems? That wan smile, the self so distanced from itself, that nearly Hindu monasticism and sly humor are all

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there. We have the *Waste Land* manuscript with Vivienne Eliot's "WONDERFUL" scrawled next to what seems a weirdly confessional passage. And we have the two volumes of Lyndall Gordon's critical biography, the fullest discussion yet of the interplay of life and art in Eliot's career.

Eliot's early denial of personality, especially in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," was rooted in his own psychological defenses, as well as in his talent for philosophical and religious abstraction. But this denial rapidly became doctrine, easily misinterpreted by droves of readers and writers. Eliot himself constantly revised his position on the matter, and his later work—especially *Four Quartets* and *The Family Reunion*—is decidedly confessional.

"Discoveries in art . . . ," wrote Marianne Moore, "are personal before they are general." There must be various levels of detachment in both life and art. The detachment of artists from their craft is a simple necessity, and Modernists were obsessed with craft, with remaking the forms of expression. When Eliot separates "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" he may well be neurotic, but it is the defining neurosis of art. His desire to direct criticism to the poem and not the poet is also extremely helpful, leading to the technique of "close reading" in the classroom and in most academic criticism. Nowadays close reading bores me; I long to attach discussions of poetry to discussions of everything else. But close, even impersonal reading remains an essential skill for students to master, and we should acknowledge the useful legacy of Eliot's ideas.

Once at a literary gathering a poet asked me whom I enjoyed reading—this was in about 1982. I harkened back to the early poems of Eliot, some of which I had memorized while in high school. When I mentioned this, the poet turned on one heel and marched away from me in righteous indignation. To admire Eliot was, in certain circles, tantamount to admiring an impersonal royalist snob. Worse, it was like admiring the desiccated corpse of the Western tradition. I can only say that most dismissals of Eliot appear to have been made by people who have not read the full range of his criticism. His arguments against a wholly secular society, for example, now seem prescient in some ways. He saw that the materialism of a consumer culture was insufficient to ensure our survival; in *The Idea of a Christian Society* his environ-

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mental position is nearly indistinguishable from that of the Sierra Club.

Eliot also modified his ideas about impersonality, especially in his 1940 essay on Yeats, where he explored "two forms of impersonality: that which is natural to the skilled craftsman, and that which is more and more achieved by the maturing artist." Yeats, he said, began as the former but became the latter. In other words, it is possible for a poet to be passionately local yet convey "a general truth." Universality is suspect in some quarters, I suppose, but I would submit that we cannot have great art without it. For better or worse, Eliot influenced writers all over the world: Montale, Seferis and Achebe come immediately to mind. Dante, Shakespeare and Yeats have had similarly global influence, which suggests that the particularities of their art have not impeded their expressions of general truths. The argument against masterpieces of this magnitude is an argument for an exclusively local poetry, which would be severely limiting. Wallace Stevens' friend, George Santayana, wrote that "The sole advantage in possessing great works of literature lies in what they can help us to become." Perhaps this was what led Stevens to declare that poetry helps us live our lives. I do not think either man meant this simplistically. Poetry is not quite bread; it does not feed the refugees who feel the pressure of reality so intensely now. But it is an awareness, a verbal precision that offers flashes of lucidity.

One of the greatest modern commentators on the poetry of life and the life of poetry is W.H. Auden. Everyone remembers his declaration that "poetry makes nothing happen," but few recall his modification of it, his insistence on poetry's survival as "A way of happening, a mouth." No modern poet was more acutely aware of the distance between political or religious experiences and their expression in poetry. As he said in *New Year Letter*:

> Art in intention is mimesis
> But, realized, the resemblance ceases;
> Art is not life, and cannot be
> A midwife to society,
> For art is a *fait accompli*. . . .

Like Robert Frost, Auden called poetry a game and denied its practicality. But both poets understood its usefulness for our

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consciousness of being in the world. Like his literary godfather, Eliot, Auden spoke of impersonality in poetry, wrongly suggesting that his biography would reveal nothing of importance about his art. But *The Dyer's Hand* makes it clear that Auden did not believe absolutely in the separation of life and art:

> Speaking for myself, the questions which interest me most when reading a poem are two. The first is technical: "Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?" The second is, in the broadest sense, moral: "What kind of a guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or the good place? His notion of the Evil One? What does he conceal from the reader? What does he conceal even from himself?"

Auden believed that the social nature of language precluded any absolutely private or solipsistic writing. "There are other social animals who have signal codes," he wrote, ". . . but only man has a language by means of which he can disclose himself to his neighbor, which he could not do and would not want to do if he did not first possess the capacity and need to disclose himself to himself."

We may feel isolated from each other, from God, from any meaning we have desired, but the language of poetry can't help being a kind of ceremony. It insists, sometimes against all reason, that we are not alone, that our most intimate or noble, trivial or terrible natures are already understood.

4. My Mother's Secret

For a poet one possible ambition is to write something so beautiful, so precise, so true, that another person, preferably many people, would choose to remember it. We may never agree on some ultimate canon of literature, but the belief in masterpieces, in great books, is essential to cultural survival.

When I was in college I read Yeats. I did not understand him, even when I had read Richard Ellmann's clarifications of his life and work, but I was besotted by the poetry. After college I refused to read Yeats for six years, fearing that his personality would completely overwhelm my own.

Language entered me through the ear; my mind lagged far

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behind in its development. When I was sixteen I read the Benjy section of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* while driving a pea combine in the Skagit Valley. The combines were gigantic shucking cylinders hauled behind diesel tractors. We drove slowly in the summer heat, the dust and chaff flying thick about us. In a forty-acre field I could get a page or two read while inching down a single row of swathed pea vines. I did not understand a word I was reading, but the poetry of Faulkner's voice entered and became part of my life. Benjy's sad vulnerability and hyper-awareness of the natural world got under my skin. Later, Eugene O'Neill's wretched family became mine, though it turns out that I was far luckier than O'Neill. Eliot's "Preludes" made perfect sense, but only as mood, as tone—I had never seen gaslights or cab horses, and knew nothing of his philosophy. I was moved by his vision of vulnerable people, and my teenage cynicism found confirmation in the poem's abrupt closure: "The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots."

In college I extolled difficult literature that I did not understand. I remember sitting at the family dinner table one vacation when my older brother insisted that I explain why Faulkner was a great writer. I could not, because I did not understand what my ear had taken in. My brother mocked me, and I left the table in tears.

Something else happened to me on one of those vacations. I attempted to write the following anecdote into a short story, which I showed to my favorite professor; he told me that the story was full of inaccuracies. People just didn't behave the way I had them behave. "People don't walk around quoting poetry," he said. About most of the story he was surely right, but not that last remark. People do quote poetry, or refer to it—some do, anyway—and they connect it to their lives.

My parents had been divorced for years when this happened. I won't go into the gory details, except to say that in hindsight their divorce has the inevitability of art. It too was set in motion by the war, or events long before the war. My mother had raised my brothers and me through hard times. Both of my parents endured hard times, but I am particularly concerned here with my mother. She was dating a man who had taught me to play chess years before, and who took an active interest in my love of reading. On one of my trips home from college I had brought my

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selected Yeats, and after dinner I sat in the living room with this man and my mother, talking about the Irish poet.

My mother was a psychology professor, and, though our house was full of books, I had never thought of her as someone who read poetry. She surprised me by saying there was a poem of Yeats she especially liked, and asked to borrow my book. While she leafed through it, looking for the poem, I tried to show off my knowledge to her indulgent friend.

At last she found the poem. She did not read it aloud, but passed the book to me so I could see what she had indicated. Here is the poem I read silently that night:

> Others because you did not keep
> That deep-sworn vow have been friends of mine;
> Yet always when I look death in the face,
> When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
> Or when I grow excited with wine,
> Suddenly I meet your face.

Of course I did not understand it at the time. She was talking to me through Yeats, using the poem to explain her life to me. She wanted me to know that she still loved my father, despite all the hell they put each other through. Yeats's voice speaks across time. It is specific to his life, his loves and prejudices. Yet it becomes one of our voices too, the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. The poetry of life and the life of poetry mean that reality alone is no place to live.

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RANDOLPH THOMAS

May Prescott

Aunt May was twenty-five the summer I stayed with her. Her skin was dark, her hair long and fine. She had high cheekbones and brown eyes. She was my mother's only sister and she lived alone in the farmhouse that had belonged to my grandparents, in Ellett Valley, forty miles southwest of Roanoke, Virginia. My grandparents were dead, and the remote location of the farm—the nearest village was Cambria, fifteen miles away—had given May a quiet independence that would prove dangerous in the years to come.

I was twelve. My mother had died of cancer that spring and was buried in northern Virginia where we were living at the time. May sent me a card but did not attend the funeral. I asked my father why, and he told me Aunt May had a lot to do at the farm, that she did not travel well. I accepted this answer. I did not know much about May, except that she lived on the farm that was half hers and half mine. I barely even remembered the farm or Aunt May. When I was little and my grandparents were still living, we visited sometimes in the summer, but May had been shy and standoffish around us, barely even a presence.

My father was a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, and after my mother died he requested a transfer to Korea. I remained in the military school I had been attending. That summer I was to stay with my father's parents, which I wasn't looking forward to. Most of the men in my father's family had been in the military. My grandfather had been an officer in the years between the world wars. Whenever I visited, he marched me around the yard and made me stand at attention while he barked out orders from his lawn chair where he sipped drinks from glasses with umbrellas in them. I decided I wanted to spend the summer with May at the farm and wrote to my father, asking if I could go. He refused entirely, insisting that the farm was in the middle of nowhere, that I would hate it there, but I begged and begged. Finally he gave in.

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When classes ended, I took a bus to Roanoke where May met me. She was wearing a flannel shirt and jeans. She looked thin and ill at ease in the crowded terminal as I came forward, pulling my trunk. We didn't hug. When I saw her come toward me whispering my name, I didn't even recognize her.

"Why don't you let me help you with that?" May said, leaning toward me tentatively, touching my sleeve.

"No thank you, ma'am," I said. "I'll be all right."

"Suit yourself," May said. She stood back, withdrew her hand, crossed her arms.

She walked in front of me, led me out of the terminal. When we got out to her pickup truck, I could barely lift the trunk. I was sweating, edging it up against the side of the truck when I felt her beside me, helping me. Together we heaved it up onto the tailgate. Out of breath, we leaned there together.

It was early afternoon, and the crowd that had left the terminal with us was dispersing. May shrugged, looked at the trunk.

"Is that full of rocks or what?" she said. Her hair was uncombed, tangled. It shined in the sun. She looked like what my father would have called a hippie.

"Just clothes, ma'am," I said.

She looked at the trunk and at me.

"Everything you own's in there, isn't it?" she said, smiling for the first time.

"Yes ma'am," I said. "Everything."

"Look," she said. "Don't call me ma'am, okay. You're not in the Army yet."

I looked at her. I nodded, and she ruffled my hair with her fingers.

"Let's get a pop for the drive back," she said, and I stood by the truck, guarding it, while she went to a machine and bought us some soft drinks.

The road out to Cambria, and then beyond, even farther into the country, was surrounded by forests and pastureland with horses and cows set off by split-rail fences. From time to time there were farmhouses sitting back on knolls, at the ends of long dirt or gravel driveways. Aunt May asked me if I'd ever ridden a horse or if I liked to swim. She reminded me that there was a river bordering our land. She said that we could swim there as much as we liked.

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The two-story brick house, which was built by my great-grandfather in 1884, sat on a rise. All of our pastures were rented out to neighboring farmers whose cattle and horses could be seen grazing, in groups or alone. The grasses of the pastures had been nibbled down by the grazing animals, which gave the earth—although it was bright green—a hard, barren look. There were dead trees with short, broken branches, and jagged, white rocks jutting from the ground. The land reminded me of pictures I had seen of Greece. I marvelled at the country which was so foreign looking and yet the only place I could honestly call my home.

I thought the house looked spooky. Much of the furniture was covered by sheets and made large, gray shadows against the white walls. May gave me a room in the basement. She explained that the house had electricity, but not in the basement. I would have to use a kerosene lantern after dark. I unpacked and took a nap after I arrived and when I woke up, May was sitting in the room with me, in a chair in the corner, watching me. At first I wasn't sure where I was and I lay there blinking.

"I hope I didn't scare you," May said, finally. "It's been a long time since I've seen you. I just wanted to look at you."

I didn't answer her. I just blinked and nodded. May seemed to want to talk now, and her voice, which never got very far above a whisper, was deep and halting. She got up and walked around the room. "This used to be your great-grandfather's room," she said. "It was his favorite room in the house. He liked it because it was cool in the summer."

I propped my head up on my elbow. "Did you know my great-grandfather?"

"When he was old. You favor him, I must say, especially around the eyes. And the nose. I have a picture of him when he was your age. It's in my room, and I'll show it to you sometime. But we don't have to do that now. Well, I'm keeping you awake talking. I'll go now. You take your nap. We can talk later." May left the room, but I wasn't sleepy anymore. I got up and dressed and went upstairs.

"Where's the TV?" I said. May was sitting in the living room, in one of the chairs that wasn't covered with a sheet, reading. She was beside the window. The bright afternoon light made the room look dark. The house was completely quiet.

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May looked up at me and laughed. "I don't—," she said, laughed again, waved her hand in front of her face, shook her head. "I've got a radio but no TV." I nodded. "Listen," she said. "Why don't we take a walk or something. I'll show you around, then we'll eat."

That night we had tomato casserole and pecan pie for dinner. Afterwards we listened to the radio. May got a big roll of paper from the attic, and I lay on the floor and drew pictures. After dark, she went to a place that she said was top secret and came back with a lit candle and a cracked Ouija board with letters so faint I could barely read them.

"Do you know what this is?" she said. I shook my head and she explained that we could use the Ouija board to talk to the spirits of the house. May set the board on the kitchen table, put out all the lights except for the candle. She turned a clear juice glass upside down on the board and touched the bottom with her fingertips. She told me to touch it too.

"Spirit," May said. "Spirit, can you hear me?"

The glass began to move, draggingly at first, as if the spirit were only beginning to remember how to speak. The glass moved over the word *yes*, and May said, "Spirit, do you have a message for anyone among us?" The glass continued, stopping on letters until it spelled my name.

I looked up at May, took my fingers from the glass. Her hair was parted in the middle and dangled down the sides of her cheeks. Her eyes were heavy as though she were sleepy, and her lips made a sly smile for me.

"Mom," I said.

May took her hands off the glass. She reached across the board and touched my shoulders. She squeezed them.

"No," she said. "No, I don't think it is."

"What if it is?" I said.

"It can't be," May said. She bit her lip. "It can't be her because she hasn't been gone long enough." She was still squeezing my shoulders, and now she was looking into my eyes. "You can only talk to people who have been gone a long time," she said. She suggested that we talk to my great-grandfather.

"Ask him about Mom," I said, and May did. My mother, my great-grandfather said, was fine.

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May brought the Ouija board out almost every night. My great-grandfather told us stories about the house, and my great-great-grandfather told us stories about the Civil War. In the evenings, we also listened to the radio or took turns reading each other our favorite stories from the crinkling yellow pages of books from my grandfather's library.

May had a vegetable garden. She baked her own bread, made everything we ate—rich casseroles, cakes, and pies—from scratch, and her cooking was nothing like the quick meals my mother had prepared in the prefabricated houses on the bases where I spent my early life.

Our farm had one cow for milk. It was my job, once May had taught me how, to milk it. We had two mares, which we rode to the river to picnic at least every other day, and there was a hen house. We called it the hen hotel because there were so many vacancies.

The farmers who used our land cared for their own animals, and occasionally we saw our neighbors when we were hiking or riding along some ridge, or stopped, eating sandwiches beside a rock. But except for these glimpses and for an occasional drive to Gibbons store in Cambria, the summer was completely ours, and we did not have to share it with anyone.

After morning chores were completed, May made sandwiches—tomato and mayonnaise or ham and sweet pickles with a dab of mustard—and we rode the mile path to the river. The path was narrow. Around it, as the ground became steep, there were more rocks and willows, some of which were very tall with long, sweeping branches that rattled if the wind blew. But mostly the days were hot. We wore shorts and T-shirts. At the bottom of the hill, a line of willows ran the length of the river and leaned out over the water. Beneath the trees were rocks, and there was no beach, only a five-foot drop to the river. We would let the horses graze. We ate our lunch on the rocks and then dove into the river in our clothes.

On the other side of the river was more pastureland which belonged to a neighbor. There were always sheep coming up to the edge of the river and bleating to us. Sometimes we threw bits of bread to them. We swam and played, splashing each other, and then we lay beyond the tree line in the sun until our clothes dried.

One afternoon, I was swimming against the current, upstream to a wide spot where the water ran faster. We were playing water

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tag. May was swimming after me, calling my name between gulps and laughter. Rounding a bend, I realized she was so far behind me that she wouldn't come into view for two or three minutes. I moved to the side, clawed at the dirt bank until I could reach a branch, and pulled myself out of the water. I scrambled up over the bank and lay with just my head leaning out far enough to see her. May rounded the bend and swam past me. I pulled my knees up underneath me, knelt, and sprang into the water behind her. I landed in a hole, six or seven feet deep in the river bottom. The water was brown, and I couldn't see anything. When I bobbed up, the current took me by surprise. It seemed suddenly stronger, and my breath was knocked out of me. The water pulled me into another hole. There was water in my mouth and lungs. I was coughing. I'd been washed about twenty or twenty-five feet when I felt May's arm around me, under my arms. I felt her legs kicking behind me, under me, between my legs as she pulled me to the side where she pressed her back against the bank and held me. I was still coughing, but she was already squeezing me from behind, forcing the water out of me. I could feel her breasts heaving against my back, her breath against my neck.

"I'm sorry," I said, my words broken by coughs.

"Thank God," she said, and I felt her wet lips against the back of my neck. "Thank God."

By the time we got out of the water, it had started to rain. The sky had been clear blue all morning, and the rain, which had arisen suddenly, was one of those hard summer rains that doesn't usually last long. We ran home through the rain. It wasn't until we reached the house that I realized I had lost my watch. It was one my father had given me for Christmas three years before. The watch was on a stretch band. After I'd calmed down, I could remember the water pulling it over my hand.

"That watch is gone," May said. We were sitting on the wide wooden porch that ran across the front of the house, watching the rain. We were still wet, catching our breath, sitting side by side. May put her arm around my shoulder and held me to her, rubbed my hair and kissed my cheek. "There's no use looking for it," she said. "You'll never find it again."

The next day I finished my chores early and walked down to the river. I believed that the rain might have washed the mud out of the river, that I might be able to see my watch on the bottom. I

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walked the length of our land on the rocks, looking down into the water which was still a murky brown. I didn't see anything except a dead lamb floating. The lamb was newborn. I stared at its thin, white hair, at the pink of its lips and its eyelids, which looked like they were pinched shut. The lamb washed against a rock and was caught there. I looked across the river, thinking that its mother might be watching from the other side, but that day I saw no other sheep. I heard May calling me, and turning, saw her walking down from the house. I looked back at the lamb, saw that it had washed free from the rock, and ran to May.

The next morning I awoke with a fever from a summer cold I had caught the day we ran through the rain. I ran a temperature for two days. May moved me to one of the upstairs rooms where she brought me soup and sandwiches. She read to me. At night, when I awoke from bad dreams, sweating, May was already in the room with me, asleep or reading in a chair. She gave me alcohol rubs. Afterwards, she sat on the corner of my bed, massaged my face and my hair and whispered stories and jokes to me until I fell asleep. One night after the fever broke, I awoke and found myself alone. I had become spoiled by May's doting on me. I climbed out of bed and walked down the hall to her room. The hall was dark and the house was quiet. I closed my hand into a fist and was about to knock when her door sprang open. May stood before me, her robe pulled around her. The lamp beside the bed was on, and it lighted her face. I could see sweat on her cheeks and brow. I didn't say anything, only stood there looking at her. Slowly, she smiled at me.

"You were lonely too," she said. I nodded. She bit her lip and smiled and looked at me. Then she took my hand and led me to bed. I climbed in, pulled the sheet up to my chin and watched May. She pulled her robe tighter around her, and retied the belt, and climbed under the sheet with me where she held me against her.

After that we always slept together, in her bed, which she always made in the mornings, neatly folding the simple white spread, which had been made by her mother, around the corners of the pillows. May always slept with her cotton robe tied around her and some nights after she had fallen asleep, I would turn and watch her, the curves of her body beneath the sheet that covered us.

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In the middle of June, we made our first trip into Cambria to get some groceries from Gibbons store. Cambria, at the base of a mountain, consisted of two stoplights, a few stores, a boarded-up train station, and a post office. May had been talking about the trip for over a week, but she had put it off until it was absolutely necessary.

When we got into town, May parked on the street and we got out. Walking along the cracked and broken sidewalk, I saw two boys a couple of years younger than I was sitting on a bench between the post office and the store. They both looked dirty from play, their hair long and wild. I stopped walking and looked at them. May didn't stop, but speeded up. I had to run to keep up with her. When we got in the store, the man behind the counter said, "Miss Prescott, George Riley wants to come out and see if you need any fencing done." May stood and looked at him and nodded.

"I don't think we need anything," she finally said, her head bowed as if she were closely examining the scuffs of the tile floor.

"He's hard up, Miss Prescott," the man continued. "I don't know if you heard, but Agnes is laid up in Roanoke, and it looks real bad for her. I'm sure George'd do about any kind of job you could come up with."

May nodded again but didn't answer. She headed down an aisle toward the back, stopped at the wall, held herself and closed her eyes. I followed her and stood near her.

"What are you looking at me for?" May said. Then, "Why didn't you get a cart?"

I shrugged, knowing that something was wrong and not understanding what. "I'll go," she said, and she headed toward the carts at the front of the store. May had a list of things we needed, and she began gathering them from the aisles and putting them in the cart. I followed her but she was ignoring me. I felt useless to her and I wandered back outside. The two boys were still there. They looked like brothers, and one of them was a little taller, maybe a year or two older, than the other one.

"What are you doing?" the older boy said.

"Waiting on my aunt," I said.

"We're waiting too," the boy said.

They studied me. I glanced up the post office steps.

"What's up there?" I said.

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The older boy shrugged and then the younger one shrugged, imitating him.

I wandered up the steps. Gradually, they followed me. I opened the glass door and went inside.

Except for us, the post office was deserted. I pointed to the wanted posters on the bulletin board. "Can you read?" I said, and the older boy shook his head. I read the wanted posters to them and began looking through some armed forces literature that was stacked on one of the tables. I showed them a picture of a new fighter jet, explained that my father was an officer in the Air Force, that once, on the base where we lived, he had taken me to see this very jet, that I had sat in it and pretended to fly it. The older boy nodded and shrugged, and the other watched him to see how he was supposed to act. I was looking down at the brochure again when May grabbed my arm. I turned around. May took hold of me with both hands and shook me. Her face was red. Looking around her, I saw the two boys dash out the door.

"What do you think you're doing?" she said. "What do you mean running off like that?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't think you wanted me around."

"We've wasted enough time," she said. "Let's go home." She pulled me, her grip tight on my arm, down the steps of the post office. May was practically dragging me, saying, "How could you?" under her breath. I turned and saw the man from the store watching us through the window. May opened my door and said, "Get in." Then she went around to her side, got in and slammed the door behind her. The tires squealed and stirred up a cloud of dust, erasing Cambria as she pulled out. May drove fast, her gaze fixed forward. We drove about a mile out of town at breakneck speed. Even after she slowed down, May was quiet. She didn't talk during dinner, and there was no Ouija board that night. Later, after we had gone to bed, I heard May crying beside me. Her back to me, I reached over her, touched her face. I held my hand against her cheek. She turned around and put her arms around me. She said over and over that she was sorry, but I was careful during all of our other trips to Cambria. I stayed close to May but tried to stay out of her way. In town, she was always tense and nervous, but I never gave her the opportunity to get mad at me there again.

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Our days and nights at the farm continued unchanged, but I was changing. One afternoon in late July, after we had been swimming and while we lay on the bank drying ourselves, I propped myself up on my elbows and looked at her. She was lying flat on her back beside me, her eyes closed. I watched her breasts and her flat stomach move as she breathed. Her nipples were wide and dark through her shirt. Her shirt was short. Her belly button was exposed, and I reached out and tickled it lightly with my finger.

May laughed and spoke my name. I put my hand flat against her stomach, and May laughed again.

"Stop," she said, "your hand is cold," but she didn't open her eyes, and I began to move my hand, walking it like a spider. May continued to giggle. I moved my hand faster, up under her shirt toward one of her breasts.

"Cut it out," she said. She sat up. Her brow was wrinkled and her hands were both on my arm, roughly forcing it down and out of her shirt.

"Ow," I said, because she was bending my arm backwards. "Hey, I'm sorry, that hurts."

I wrenched my arm free and looked away from her. I stood up, ran toward the house.

"Stop," I heard her say. "Wait for me."

I was confused and stumbling over rocks, not staying on the path, and she caught up with me.

"Hold it," she said. She grabbed the back of my shirt, but I pulled, stretching it.

"Wait." She grabbed me around the shoulder, circled her other arm around my waist, and knocked me off balance. We rolled on the ground and she pinned me.

"Listen," May said. "I'm sorry I hurt you, but there are things you're not supposed to do. I know you come from a place where there aren't any girls."

After dinner, May said that maybe I should sleep in the room downstairs. I picked at my food and didn't answer her. The next day, we did our chores, rode to the river, picnicked and swam. At night after the stories or games or the Ouija board, May retired to her room upstairs, closing the door behind her.

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August was very dry and hot. As the date of my return to school drew near, we talked about my visiting the next summer. The length of a year seemed impossibly long to me, and the rigorous schedules and assignments had now grown as foreign as the ease and ennui of life on the farm had been before I came. A few nights before I left, I caught May cheating with the Ouija board, pulling her edge of the glass to make answers that would make me laugh or be spooky and mysterious. In truth, I had known it wasn't real for some time and this night, perhaps because I was angry for having to leave, I lifted my fingers from the rim of the glass, which tipped from the pressure of May's fingers. The glass rolled across the board and dropped to the floor.

"I caught you," I said.

"What?" May said.

"You were cheating," I said.

"No."

"Yes you were. You were making it all up."

"But I wasn't making it up," May said. "How can you sit there and call me a liar?"

"I'm not." I shrugged.

May's eyes narrowed watching me. Her face became red, her voice lowered. "These are the spirits of this house," she said. "These are the spirits of these walls."

"You were moving it," I said. "Why else would the glass have gone off the table like it did, unless you were moving it."

"Because you doubted the spirits," she said, "and it made the spirits nervous."

I shook my head. May stood. She picked up the board, bent over, and picked up the glass from the floor.

"All right then," she said. "You believe whatever you want." She headed out of the room.

"Come back," I said, but she was heading up the stairs. "I didn't mean it," I called after her, but then I heard her footsteps cross the big hall upstairs, heard her bedroom door slam, and we never played with, or spoke of, the Ouija board again.

The day I left to go back to school, May was quiet but cheerful when she spoke. My breakfast was on the table when I came into the kitchen. She watched me eat and afterwards, we drove to the bus terminal in Roanoke where she put fifteen dollars in my

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hand, gave me a bag of egg sandwiches. We pulled my trunk inside, and both of us laughed when I bumped into a man because I wasn't watching where I was going. Before I got on the bus, she hugged me hard. She told me to write her and to mind my father. I said I would. When I got to my seat, I propped open the window just as the bus began to move out of the terminal. There was a crowd of people outside waving good-bye. I searched for May, but I could not find her among them.

That was August of 1974, and I did not return to the farm for seventeen years. When I did, I came in a station wagon with my wife and children one afternoon following a week-long drive across the country. I showed my family into the living room but I was overcome by the place—it was exactly the same as I remembered. I had planned to give them a tour, but my voice faltered. Melissa, my wife, sensed that I wanted to be alone. She took the boys—Michael and Todd—outside. Upstairs, I found the door to May's room open. On her desk by the window, I found a wide vase full of letters bound in rubber bands. More than half of the letters were from me, and I marvelled at the number of letters I had sent her.

I began writing to May the day I left, while on the bus to northern Virginia. After I returned to school, I missed May and the farm. I became bored with my schoolwork. My grades slipped to just above the passing mark. May and I wrote to each other at least once a week, telling each other about our days, and I looked forward to her letters like nothing else because they freed me, if only for a short time, from the strictness and monotony of my life. That spring, my father was promoted to full Colonel and given command of a base in Hawaii. Although I wanted to go to the farm and see May, my father was adamant that I should join him. I wrote to May, and she replied that my father was right, that I should be with him. She said that perhaps I could come the following summer instead.

In Hawaii, I felt that May and the farm had been in some distant world. This depressed me, but I enjoyed spending time with my father. We played tennis almost every day. I wanted to enroll in a non-military private school, but my father resisted, telling me I needed preparation for the Air Force Academy,

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which was only a few years away. He made me adhere to rigorous study hours in the evening, coached me with my homework, and, gradually, my grades did improve. One night, he came into my room without knocking and found me writing a letter to May by flashlight.

"I thought I said lights out," he said, but after I told him what I was doing, he smiled. He took the letter from my hand and glanced over it.

"You know," he said, "it's very good of you to keep up with your mother's family."

I nodded and looked at the letter in his hand.

"When I was your age, your grandfather had to make me write to the relatives. He made me sit down at the dining room table and do it."

I was looking at his face. My father was a very tall man with a broad forehead and a receding hairline. His eyes, though, were small and he squinted nervously.

"This would make your mother happy." He turned his head away. He set the letter on the table, patted my knee through the sheet, then, composed, looked at me again. "All the same, I said lights out. You can finish that letter to your Aunt May tomorrow."

He cut off the light and went out of the room. I realized then that I had been close to May in a way he didn't realize. From the beginning I had known—I don't know how I knew—that I would never tell him that I had slept in the same bed with May. Now I understand that I was right not to tell him, that he would have thought that May was perverse. May had been clinging desperately to the only family she had, treating me as though I were her own child, a child she did not know exactly how to love. She had meant nothing sexual or hurtful. But I had loved May. She was the first woman I ever fell in love with.

That was the fall I turned fourteen and got drunk for the first time when I was spending the night at a friend's house. That was the year of my second crush, on a girl a few years older than me who worked as a lifeguard and who let me kiss her once after I stayed late helping her close down the pool. That same spring, my father told me at breakfast one morning that he had heard from the attorney in Roanoke who was looking after my trust. A neighbor had found May wandering in one of the pastures we

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rented. She spoke to the neighbor belligerently. Worried, the neighbor telephoned the sheriff, who found May in her bathtub a short enough time after she had slit her wrists to save her life. May had been hospitalized in what my father called a sanatorium.

My father came over to my side of the table, awkwardly put his arm around me and said that he was sorry. I sat at the table stiffly and didn't acknowledge his embrace.

He said that May had mental problems.

"Yes," I said. "I know that."

"She can't cope with people," he said. "She shuts herself up on that farm. Your grandparents knew she had problems, but they didn't do anything about it." He looked at me, and for lack of anything else to say, I suppose, he shrugged.

Of course there would be no trip to the farm that summer. I saw this, was disappointed by it, and at the same time felt ashamed at my selfish disappointment. I looked down at my food. Having lost my appetite, I said I wanted to go to the pool. Instead, I walked to the ocean and lay on the sand for the rest of the morning.

Sometimes as I was drifting off to sleep, May would return to me, her voice speaking or laughing inside my head, or I would see the outline of her body beside me. I thought of when we would lie beside the river drying ourselves and of her laughter during our sunny days together.

I worried about May. I continued to write her, although I didn't know what to say in my letters except what I had always said: I told her how I was feeling, described what I was doing and studying, and went back over the experiences I most enjoyed when I had stayed with her. I didn't hear from her for nearly two months, and then she wrote to me from the farm. In the letter, she sounded fine. She said the hen hotel was doing better business and that the cow refused to be milked by anyone but me. The letter cheered me up. I wrote her back immediately, but May was hospitalized again and again. Gradually our letters dwindled to three or four a year.

Ultimately, I failed my father by refusing to go to the Air Force Academy. I did not even apply. I eloped, instead, with Melissa, whom I had been dating for five months. We flew to the mainland, to Los Angeles, where we stayed with Melissa's sister until we found our own place. Over the next six years, both of us attended UCLA part time and worked. I got a degree in journal-

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ism, and found a job working for a trade journal. I kept in touch with my father regularly. Over the years, especially after the boys were born, we grew closer again. Once, though, when we were in the midst of a heated long-distance argument, he said, "You're one of them all right."

"What?" I said. It was three o'clock in the morning. I was sitting on the fire escape, with the kitchen window closed on the telephone cord so only the neighbors, and not Melissa or her sister, could hear me arguing with my father.

"Unreasonable," he said. "You're irrational. Crazy. Prescotts."

I have since forgiven him for saying this. I know that he truly loved my mother, and except for that one angry outburst, which came from his disappointment in me alone, he has always held a silent reverence for my mother's family.

But he was right. I am one of them. Maybe not completely. Maybe only half. At the farm, while the boys played on the lawn and while I was looking through May's papers, I came across a stack of family photographs. There were only ten or eleven, some of them of people I did not recognize, but I found the photograph of great-grandfather, the one May had promised to show me but never had. He was a boy, wearing shorts and the white bib children wore then. He was sitting on a fence, and there was a hunting dog staring up at him. His hair was parted in the middle and combed neatly to the sides. Beside the styles that separated our times, we bore a striking resemblance.

I also found a picture of my mother and father, shortly after they were married, standing in the living room downstairs. They had been fishing. My father held a net in one hand, a rod in the other. I realized for the first time how much my mother looked like May Prescott when she was younger. May would have been five or six at the time the photograph was taken, and I wondered if she had been in the room, hiding behind a piece of furniture, her face buried in her hands.

My father settled in San Diego after he retired. He never remarried and his face took on the unnatural redness of an alcoholic. When he called me one day and said it was urgent that we speak in private, I was sure he was only going to brood, complain about the world, and speak at length on the dwindling greatness of our family. I went anyway—I always go—and met him

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for lunch at his military club. As was the case each time I had seen him since his retirement, he was drinking gin and smoking cigars. We sat at a table in a windowless room with ceiling fans. While I ate, his bloodshot eyes watched me, and I kept expecting that a speech was imminent. When I finished eating, he said as if I wouldn't even remember her, "I have some bad news. May Prescott, your mother's sister, has drowned herself."

For me, May and this place will always be inseparable. When I finished looking through her letters, I put them back. Outside, walking to the river with a bouquet of wildflowers Melissa had picked, I saw a neighbor in the distance mending a wire fence. He waved and I waved back. The river smelled fresh, and I could smell the pungent manure of the animals. I wondered how May could have suffered here, perished here, in the first place I had felt alive.

That night, after I had settled the boys into their room, called lights out, and retired to the dark of the basement where Melissa and I were to sleep, I remembered May's voice as clearly as I remembered the stone wall at my back and the lantern that was burning beside me.

"I'm going to miss you," May had said. It was two or three nights before I left for school. It was dark. My eyes focused on her standing in my room, her face above the lantern she carried. She moved to the doorway. "Why don't you come on," she said. "I think it'll be all right." I got out of bed and followed her up the steps through the living room and the hall, up the steps to the second floor, and to her room where we got into bed and she turned out the light.

"Aren't you going to miss me?" she said.

I couldn't answer because I didn't want to have to miss her.

May pulled the sheet over my head and started tickling me. I laughed until my eyes welled with tears. May laughed and later—after she had whispered my name and believed that I had gone to sleep—I heard her cry. She had turned away from me. Her cries were muffled, but I still hear them fill the house, echoing through all the rooms. I hear them by the river where we picnicked, in all the places where my children laugh and play.

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MADISON SMARTT BELL

Miroir Danjere

According to the *vaudou* beliefs in which the country has been saturated since the time of slavery, the ocean surrounding Haiti is a mirror, whose surface divides the world of the living from the world of the dead. The division is not absolute, however, for in *vaudou* as in the African religions from which it springs the dead do not depart, but remain present and available for communion with the living. It's fortunate that no one really dies in Haiti, since it has always been a bloody place.

All black people who have ever died in Haiti (and over the three hundred years since slavery was first introduced there this must make a very large number) inhabit a place called the Island Below Sea, which is also Guinée, or Africa. During the slave trade many captives jumped from the ships to drown themselves, believing that by this route they would return to Africa. Today the *vaudou* conception of Guinée has evolved into a spiritual location; the Island Below Sea is a parallel universe reflecting our own, but still believers must enter it. So at the beginning of *vaudou* rituals, they sing *o creole, sondé miroir,* an exhortation to *pierce the mirror,* so that the spirits of the living can once more reach Guinée, so that the souls of the dead can also reach the living world as *loa*—the pantheon of gods who take possession of their worshipers. For the same reason the members of the increasingly popular Haitian musical group Boukman Eksperyans sing, in their wistfully lyrical ballad *Eve,* of falling through the surface of a sacred pool which is another version of this mirror. In this way the singers and their believing listeners can reach the world of the dead and the world of the *loa.* Haitian *vaudou* may be the last living religion on earth; the gods are present and one speaks to them face to face.

If you are white and a foreigner, chances are that you know little of these matters. The ocean is merely a place for a pleasant frolic, Boukman Eksperyans no more than good dance music, with (if you translate the lyrics from Haitian creole) a little politics

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mixed in. On June 4, the Club Med location a few miles north of Port Au Prince was reopened for a meeting of the Organization of American States, so again there are foreign swimmers in that beautiful blue water, though it's unlikely that they know they are also drifting in a sea of *vaudou* metaphysics. From Club Med to the Port-au-Prince airport the road has been perfectly repaired (although the reflectors placed on either side have already been stolen), and the roadside has been purged of the beggars and vendors who usually swarm around the airport gates. But if you drive beyond the gates of Club Med and the beach hotels, you enter a completely different world, where the road to Cap Haïtien, in the northern province, has not been adequately repaired since the U.S. Marines left Haiti in the 1920s. The damaged pavement from Saint Marc to Gonaives is almost impassable; it would be better if there were none. And on the way from Cap Haïtien to Fort Liberté on the Dominican border, the road does disappear entirely, along with all other evidence of First World technology, U.N. presence, or the very existence of white people of any kind.

Parallel universes, *miroir sondé.* The Hotel Oloffson is another kind of mirror, an interface between the foreign presence and the mind-boggling anarchy of Port-au-Prince street life. The younger, hipper journalists and U.N. fellow travelers stay here, conducting their business in the excellent restaurant or beside the pleasant pool. The Oloffson is Graham Greene's hotel, the scene of his Haitian novel *The Comedians*, but now I am more reminded of *The Quiet American*—perhaps Greene's most powerful statement of the damage to be done by good intentions.

We are waiting for our own connection: Theodore Beaubrun, a.k.a. Lôlô, a member of the group Boukman Eksperyans—waiting, at first, with a considerable degree of First World impatience and frustration. We have several phone numbers and our French is good but the people who answer only speak creole—a French-based patois which has been the common language of the Haitian people since slavery time and which is also the language of the Boukman lyrics—the most powerful political songs to appear in world music since Bob Marley. Also, the telephones only work occasionally; yesterday the minister of telephones was deposed. We have an address but without knowing the back streets it takes two hours to reach it through the

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screaming insanity of Port-au-Prince traffic. When we arrive at the Boukman headquarters a pleasant young man lets us know (through the bars of the iron cage that secures the porch) that none of the Boukman people are presently there. They will be back later . . . indefinitely later. *Plus tard.* It's only later, back at the Oloffson, that I glance at a photo and realize that I have in fact been talking to Hans Dominique, a.k.a. Bois Gris, Lôlô's x-year-old son and one of the Boukman drummers. But it's like that in Haiti: when you look into the mirror, the mirror's also watching you.

In the afternoons it is very hot, heat building to a late afternoon crisis, a sudden drenching thunderstorm that comes around four each afternoon, though not quite regularly enough to set your watch by. We have stopped looking at our watches quite so often. The threads of time are attenuating. We are at the end of the rainy season, and after each evening rain the easing of tension is palpable. When Lôlô does appear at last we have stopped waiting for him so energetically and are simply there.

Lôlô is not exactly the leader of Boukman Eksperyans because the group does not exactly have a leader, but it would be fair to say that he is Boukman's foreign ambassador, facing the mirror which connects the group with and divides it from the whole world outside Haiti. Today we see him in his aspect as Theodore Beaubrun, whose elegant French might have come from the Sorbonne, and whose style of address makes it easy to imagine him as a Caribbean intellectual emerging into the First World. Theodore Beaubrun has an anthropological perspective on *vaudou* (and his wife, Mimerose, has written a scholarly dissertation on the subject), but his data comes directly from his own experiences. Or perhaps it would be better to say that they are Lôlô's experiences, since in Haiti it is possible and sometimes necessary to have more than one identity, as one may have more than one of the Great Loa in one's head.

Boukman Eksperyans takes its name from Boukman, a *vaudou* priest or *houngan* who presided over the meeting at the forest called Bois Caiman, where the slave insurrection of 1791 was planned. That first rising, astonishingly bloody and destructive, began in August 1791; Boukman himself was dead by that October, his head displayed on a stake in the Place d'Armes at Cap Haïtien. Boukman had been a slave in Jamaica before being

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sold to French-colonized Haiti; some accounts say that he had fought in the American Revolutionary War under Lafayette, as a small but significant number of Haitian slaves had done. Almost nothing else is known of him. Certainly Boukman had the ability to inflame the rebel slaves to a jihad-like fury which allowed them to flood into battle (often possessed by their gods) without fear of rifles or cannon, to overcome better-trained and armed European troops with the sheer force of their numbers and their *loa*-inspired ferocity—but also with horrific loss of life. Boukman's style of leadership got a lot of his own men killed, as it led to his own death in fairly short order. By First World standards he was not the most effective leader, and so I had always been puzzled by the group's choice of name.

Theodore, however, has an elegant explanation for this peculiarity. In *vaudou* observance, the ceremony at Bois Caiman is fully as important as the birth of Christ. That it invoked the *loa* to aid in the extermination of all the white people in Haiti does not entirely imply peace on earth and good will toward man . . . but for Theodore the bloodthirstiness of the ritual is secondary and what is most important is the unification movement over which Boukman, however briefly, presided, a movement which brought together the slaves from all over the island, most of whom had been born in Africa and spoke the different languages of their tribes. Boukman united all these different slaves with each other and with the communities of runaway slaves called maroons, who lived in mountain villages known as *lakou*. Before Bois Caiman the maroons had disliked and distrusted the plantation slaves; some maroon *lakou* had existed for decades by 1791 and many maroons had been born free in Haiti. Boukman's tools for the unification were the fusion of different African religions into a *vaudou* which all Haitian blacks could serve together, and also of course the creole language, which made it possible for so many blacks of different origin to commune with each other across the whole of a territory which was just on its way to becoming, in some sense, a nation. All this is the essence of the Boukman experience.

But in speaking to Theodore Beaubrun I am reminded less of the historical Boukman and more of Toussaint L'Ouverture. It was Toussaint, after Boukman's death, who took the reins of the slave rebellion and turned it into a proper revolution—the only successful slave revolution in history. In 1791 Toussaint was in late

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middle age and had been for a number of years a trusted overseer on a plantation near Cap Haïtien. Although he had spent all of his life in slavery he was literate and had read both L'Abbé Raynal and the ancient slave philosopher Epictetus. Born in Haiti, he was more Europeanized than most Haitian slaves; he was a devout Catholic and at the height of his career considered himself to be a citizen of the French Republic. He studied European military methods and adapted them to the natural talents of the rebel slaves, forging an army which successfully repelled several European invasions, including the expedition Napoleon sent from France to restore slavery in Haiti. By the time of this final victory, Toussaint had been betrayed and deported to France, where he soon died. As he embarked on the ship that took him away from Haiti, he turned to his French captors and said, "In overthrowing me, you think you have cut down the tree of liberty, but it will spring back from the roots, for they are numerous and deep."

And Theodore Beaubrun sounds very much like Toussaint when explaining *la musique des racines*, or roots music, the movement of which Boukman Eksperyans is part. *La musique des racines* evolved as a sort of antidote to *compas*, a smiley-faced tourist-pleasing music popular with the Duvalier regime. *La musique des racines* is based on *vaudou* drumming and also on *rara*, a festival music performed in street parades, whose lyrics often seek to make political points. In Haiti, politics and religion are inextricably intertwined, and the power of the political statements in the Boukman lyrics comes from their profound, archetypal religious base (as was also the case with Bob Marley). Since the turn of the nineteenth century, the ruling factions of Haiti have always feared *vaudou* even while practicing it themselves, for *vaudou* (temple to temple and *hounfor* to *hounfor*) is a nationwide network with a marked structural similarity to the cellular architecture of left-wing revolutionary groups, and for two hundred years it has been impossible to eradicate.

Boukman Eksperyans, along with other *racines* musical groups, has the power to bring *vaudou* openly into politics again—to reactivate the energies Boukman tapped in 1791. For that reason the group is feared and hated by the powers behind the coup against Aristide. The whole Boukman entourage came very close to being assassinated *en masse* at a concert in 1993; they were surrounded by hostile army personnel but protected by other

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soldiers who took their part. Unfortunately, although the Haitian army no longer exists, both of these factions are still alive and armed, so that the officer who did the most to protect Boukman Eksperyans in 1993 was murdered on the streets of Port-au-Prince four days before our conversation with Theodore Beaubrun. To assassinate someone in Port-au-Prince you shoot from a lightweight motorcycle which can vanish quickly through the stalled bus and car traffic everywhere on the streets . . . but there are a lot of people to kill, and there are many groups who play *la musique des racines*, and the music is heard everywhere. The state of mind of the oligarchs deposed by Aristide's return must resemble that of the French General Leclerc, who reported to Napoleon in 1802 that it was not enough to have deported Toussaint from Haiti because there were at least two thousand chiefs still to be removed, and who later wrote that for the French to regain control of the island it would be necessary to kill all black males above the age of twelve. If to us that seems a long time ago, in the hall of mirrors of the Haitian sense of time, two hundred years can be next to no distance at all.

Now it is once again (though perhaps temporarily) the time of Aristide, of Lavalas, of black power in Haiti—albeit propped up by the U.N. occupation, the helicopters floundering above the Hotel Oloffson, the rat-patrol Jeeps carrying blue-helmeted troops around the streets of Cap Haïtien. But apart from the U.N., everyone on the streets of Port-au-Prince and on the northern roads as far as Fort Liberté looks pure African. The substantial population of mixed-blood people is still here but in hiding, behind the wall of the impressively fortified villas of Pétionville or other similar sanctuaries. *Les gens de couleur*, as they were once known, have always been a significant force in Haitian politics. Before the revolution of 1791 they had much wealth and sometimes owned slaves themselves—if the white colonists had not been so determined to deny them (their own children!) all political rights, the African slave rebellion might have been suppressed. But the white colonial intention toward the mulattos tended instead toward genocide; in prerevolutionary pogroms the whites would, for instance, eviscerate pregnant colored women and display their foetuses on spears. This practice was later adopted by both the blacks and the mulattos for retaliations against the whites. The black/mulatto civil war of 1799 was

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bitterest of all—known as the War of Knives because the combatants were inspired by their reciprocal hatred to throw down their guns and attack each other with nails and teeth instead. As for today, one has only to remember the face of General Cedras to understand that what Aristide likes to call the struggle of the eggplant and the ginger still plays its part in Haitian politics.

But Boukman Eksperyans is a unity movement. On Saturday nights the group plays at a chic Pétionville club called the Garage, fancifully decorated with old auto parts. The audience here is both multiracial and multinational. *Les gens de couleur* of Pétionville are well-represented, as are U.N. military and civilian personnel, as are the pure black *vaudouists*, or *serviteurs* as they call themselves, those who serve the *loa*. There are even a couple of reasonably discreet CIA operatives to round out the picture.

The performance does a lot to show why Boukman Eksperyans is winning a broad international popularity, why the band's three CDs sell briskly in markets that have no knowledge of the creole language and little interest in Haitian politics. At the surface level, *la musique des racines* is simply great dance music, based on a fusion of *vaudou* drumming with rock guitar. The drummers, Bois Gris among them, play the *rada batterie*, a set of three skin-headed drums which are extremely sacred and which may themselves sometimes be possessed by spirits. The three drummers create the roots of the band's intricate and rapidly shifting rhythms—far more sensitive and complex than anything found in blues or rock or reggae. The guitar style owes a lot to rock heroes like Hendrix and Santana, although, oddly, it is mostly based on major scales instead of the minor pentatonics of the blues. The guitarists can certainly tear off classic rock solos whenever the spirits suggest it, and this good guitar sound helps account for the group's pop success in the First World. But Boukman Eksperyans is by no means a guitar-driven band. The rhythm function of the guitars is negligible, and the core of the sound, as in traditional *vaudou*, is drums and voice (the women singers, especially, achieve some sweet *a cappella* effects)—but mostly drums.

I had also had the honor of hearing the drums without guitars, in Cap Haïtien the night before. Cap Haïtien is a very different sort of town than Port-au-Prince; smaller and less hectic; its architecture and its mood retain the aura of the first post-colonial times. Also there is no electricity in Cap Haïtien, or next to none:

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the two international hotels have generators, as do a few small businesses which don't run them late. The result of this situation is a sort of unofficial curfew. By the time we left the hotel where we had eaten to walk back to the hotel where we were staying, it was darker than the inside of a grave.

Picking our way most delicately through the ink-black streets, we could already hear the drumming, and at the driveway of our hotel we could also hear the voices of *les possedés.* It was the first time I had heard the *loa* speak through a human body, but there was no mistaking the sound. Also the hypnotic power of the drums compelled me, despite the obvious danger; Cap Haïtien neighborhoods are tiny and closely packed and the corner where the drums came from was one we'd thought unsafe to explore even by daylight.

My companion, reluctant to run toward the drums, returned to the hotel while I squatted down to listen. Gradually I crept up the street, feeling out the invisible surfaces with my feet in case I had to retreat rapidly. There were other people not far from me, but I could not see them. The night was clear, the stars were perfect, and as my eyes began to adjust I realized the white shirt I was wearing stood out like a beacon.

When I passed through the hotel bar, having changed into a black shirt, I saw a young Haitian painter we'd befriended the night before. That he was willing to escort me turned out to be a very good thing, because the ceremony was not at street level. We entered a small twisting alley which rose almost straight up; because it was also apparently a sort of trash chute I had to cling to the walls and sometimes drop to my hands and knees, although my guide walked easily erect, with the grace of the resilient little goats that scatter half-wild all through the Haitian countryside. The drum sound coiled through the dark passage and drew me up into itself. Interesting to hear it now without the overlays of guitar and pop production Boukman uses. The sophisticated tonal shading gave the drums the character of human voices, so it was easy enough to forget the players and believe we heard, directly, the voice of the *loa.*

Because of the intractable problem of my skin color, we stayed in the shadows outside the perimeter of the *hounfor.* The arrangement was utterly simple: an area of packed earth with a six-foot-high stake driven into the center; this stake, in *vaudou,* is called

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the *poteau mitan*—a device for piercing the surface of the mirror that divides the living world from the subaqueous habitat of *Les Morts et Les Mystères.* The intersection of the vertical stake with the horizontal surface of the mirror creates a crossroads—it's the same crossroads that Robert Johnson sang about, and in creole it is called *kalfou.* The Great Loa, who form their individual characters from the aggregate spiritual force of all *Les Morts et Les Mystères,* use the *poteau mitan* to pass this *kalfou* and so arrive to take possession of the bodies of the living. But the crossroads is a flexible concept in *vaudou* metaphysics, and can be rotated horizontally to apply to the world of strictly human affairs; thus Boukman Eksperyans' most politically volatile song and album is called *Kalfou Danjere.*

Dangerous Crossroads. What I saw at Cap Haïtien was enough to let me see that the Garage, or part of it, was a *hounfor* too. The club is L-shaped, with the intersection at the stage, and the stage roof incorporates a living tree which serves as the *poteau mitan.* The area directly stage-front became, as the night went on, increasingly the territory of *les serviteurs,* while the multiracial, multinational fraction of the audience tended to cluster on the other leg of the L, close to the bar. Because of the crowding, the easiest passage from one area to the other went through Boukman's dressing room, diagonally, and this became, for me at least, another kind of crossroads.

In Haiti, time is not measured as in the First World; everything is going to happen indefinitely *plus tard.* You adapt to that or go mad with frustration, I suppose. It is no country for impatience of any kind. We had hired a guide to go with us to Cap Haïtien; he could not drive and knew little of geography, but he could ask directions in creole, and his language skill proved invaluable during our various breakdowns. On the northern road there are more potholes than pavement. We changed our first flat with the usual First World sweaty impatience, exacerbated by the discovery, some miles down the road, that our guide had abandoned, somewhere behind us on the ground, the lug nuts that held the spare tire. By the second day, stranded in a village on the northern plain with two tires gone flat simultaneously, our sense of urgency had materially decreased. We had learned from our guide that the road past Gonaives would be both better and worse than the road before, that in creole "*icit-la*" means both here and

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there, and that the "*quelques minutes*" required for the repairs could easily evolve into several hours.

For "*quelques minutes*" we provided entertainment for idlers on the town square. A sort of village idiot appeared to incorporate us into his afternoon performance. Around the corner, beside a sacred basin (green with algae and looking prosperous for malaria and typhoid), *vaudou* drumming beat through the heat of the afternoon. As the daily thunderstorm approached, people began tactfully filtering out of the square. The clouds appeared to converge from three directions. Catholic schoolgirls passed us giggling, book satchels gracefully balanced on their heads. Beside the sacred basin, the drumming went on. A boy cantered through the square on a small scrawny pony, his heels not quite dragging the ground. The rain began in a swirl of dust, and we sheltered under the back hatch of the crippled Jeep, without any special impatience or expectation. This was a feeling I recognized from hypnosis, when one sees oneself from both within and without, recognizing one's state, perhaps, but feeling no motive to change it. Let the drums get a little louder, one thought, and perhaps the *loa* will come.

So on Saturday night when Boukman took a break and I slipped into their dressing room, I had in some measure ceased to be an *I* full of anxious personal intention and become merely *one* who was sitting cross-legged on the floor. It didn't matter so much to this one what happened next or how long it would take to transpire. Presently the other Europeans began to leave the room, but when one rose to follow them, one was instead invited to enter a circle of joined hands with all the members of the group.

There was a small mirror in the room, which the women in the group had used to prepare for their act; it must have been a coincidence that my place in the circle faced this mirror, but the sight of a white face was a palpable shock. I closed my eyes to get away from it. I was hideously tense and my grip was too tight. Perhaps there were other problems in the circle as well. The silence went on for a long time, for some time after I was able to let my hands go slack. Then the band began chanting. On the road north our guide had gradually slipped into creole with us, and by now I understood enough to recognize that they were saying the Lord's Prayer.

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Vaudou, as Theodore Beaubrun will gladly explain to you, has been fused with Catholicism to an extent seldom mentioned by the scholars who write books about Haitian religion. Other slave societies also blended African religion with Christianity, but since Haiti has been a pariah state for almost two hundred years, the African strain in *vaudou* is much much stronger than it is, for example, in Puerto Rican *santéria*, and it's this near-purity that delights foreign ethnologists. But the daily life of Haiti is devoutly Catholic on one side of the mirror and fervently *vaudouistic* on the other. The visual pageantry of Catholicism has made it easy, since slavery time, for Haitians to look at a sword-bearing image of Saint Jacques and also see their own warrior god, Ogûn. Today, all the busses and tap-tap taxis are elaborately decorated Catholic icons, each crowned with a motto like "Christ Capable," but these icons have their *vaudou* significance too. For a Haitian there is no difficulty in entertaining such paradoxes. It is both here and there, both now and later. There is one who will abandon lug nuts on the ground as being of no further importance once the Jeep can roll again and there is one who, happening upon these lug nuts later, will recognize their great value—something to be sold to stranded *blancs*—and that both these entities may be contained in the same body is not a contradiction.

Boukman Eksperyans is committed in the making of new fusions. Some of their songs invoke the *loa* and others sing to Jesus. "Sa'm Pedi," a moving, gospel-like lyric from Boukman's latest album, *Libète (Pran Pou Pran'l)* is an ode to the most loving and peaceful of Christian virtues; it speaks of self-surrender to the Christian spirit, and even seems to suggest that the meek will inherit the earth. In Theodore Beaubrun's interpretation, Jesus is not exactly a member of the *vaudou* pantheon but something that surrounds and includes the personified Great Loa—an analogue, perhaps, to the *vaudou* Oversoul called *Les Morts et Les Mystères*. This surprisingly Zen-like conception of Christ may be reinforced by the New Age meditation circle which Theodore joins on Sundays, together with some other band members and a select few whites who have been doing various good works in Haiti since the days of the Duvaliers. *Vaudou* is a religion constantly in process, capable of adapting itself to local circumstance and able to absorb other forms of observance as easily as China absorbs other races.

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There is another fusion at work in tonight's performance; as always there are two sides to the mirror. On the one hand, we have great dance music and all-round quality entertainment for the multinational U.N. audience, for the world music audience generally. On the other, it's becoming increasingly clear that the performance is itself a *vaudou* ceremony. You can feel this even in the States, listening to Boukman's most thoroughly structured album, *Kalfou Danjere*, which is patterned in the ascending waves of *vaudou* ritual, waves which may carry you into an altered state even if you know nothing about the religion. Tonight's concert begins, like Boukman's latest album and like most *vaudou* ceremonies, with an invocation of Legba. The *vaudou* counterpart of the Greek Hermes, Legba is the *loa* of changes, who controls the crossroads where the worlds of the living are joined; without his assent, no one may pass. With Legba's permission granted, one may invoke the other *loa*, and several of the songs on *Libète (Pran Pou Pran'l)* call different gods: Zaka (an agrarian god of planting and harvests), Simbi Ganga, Malouwe, and the war-god Ogûn. The most politically critical song of the new album, "Jou Malè," summons Ogûn in his most warlike aspect—Ogûn Feraille. And the gods do come. In the more explicitly political songs, it is the *loa* speaking as often as the singers. Lôlô reports, in the classic manner of the *serviteur*, that when he regains his sense of self after a concert, he does not always know what the gods have used his mouth to say.

The ceremonial aspect is reflected in the style of the performance as much as in its content. It's circulatory, instead of in-your-face. Lôlô (definitely Lôlô now) is less rock star than *houngan*, an influence and mediator rather than the godhead itself. Lôlô is sometimes in front of the band and sometimes behind it and sometimes somewhere in between. The center of the performance is not the lead singer, but the *poteau mitan*. In any case, there is no one lead singer, since the women members of the group take lead vocals at least as much as Lôlô, and similarly there is no single lead guitarist. The instruments are passed from hand to hand, as the sacred rattle called the *asson* would pass from one *houngan* to another, during ritual. Audience members circulate on stage among the band as the spirits move them, and as the hour grows late and the drums' intensity builds,

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some listeners fall into the kicking, jerking, convulsive state that is a crossroads between personal identity and possession by the *loa.*

At this point I am standing somewhere on a chair, trying to keep track of things. There's one side of me that wants to obliterate my identity with a nice dive into the swirling *vaudou* mosh pit, but the side that wants to remember what happened later seems to be stronger. When Lôlô salutes me from the stage I answer him with tense raised fists—a mistake, I realize, but only later, when I have lived in Haiti a few hours longer . . . . *quelques minutes.* I have never seen Lôlô make a fist, his hands are always open, moving gracefully as fish. In *vaudou* a *serviteur* will usually have a particular *loa* called the *maît'tête,* or master of the head, who possesses him more often than the others. Lôlô (so I've been told by Theodore Beaubrun) has the war-god Ogûn as his *maît'tête,* which is interesting in view of the band's comparatively pacific mode of presentation, and yet Ogûn, like the other *loa,* has many mirror images, some more violent and some less so. There is horrific latent violence in *vaudou,* and during the Haitian revolution it swept the island end to end, giving the revolted slaves under the original Boukman's leadership the will to return the atrocities visited on them by their white slavemasters a thousandfold. And Theodore Beaubrun is willing to explain that voodoo does have its savage side, a mood of hate and vengefulness: Bizango, the black magic cult of *vaudou,* ruled by sorcerors called *bokor.* Theodore will not discuss it, but it seems apparent to me that the interests of the Ton-Tons Macoutes and more lately the *attachés*—terrorism, control of the night, rape, murder, and zombification—coincide very closely with the interests of Bizango. By this reasoning, when Boukman Eksperyans sings "*Ginen pa' Bizango,*" ("Ginen is not Bizango") the refrain to "Kalfou Danjere," the group is taking a very explicit political position as well as a religious one. The inner state of Ginen, which has replaced the old *vaudou* notion of a literal Africa under the sea, is a condition of deep tranquility opposed to the cruelty and violence of Bizango . . . yet Ginen too has force to draw on, and Lôlô's *maît'tête* is Ogûn.

At four o'clock in the morning the streets of downtown Port-au-Prince are very desolate—nobody there but us and the police. And yet a visit to Haiti would not be quite complete without spending at least a few seconds looking down the wrong

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end of a rifle barrel. We are fortunate, however, to be dealing with the new police trainees (though many of these come from the cadre of ex-soldiers, Macoutes, and *attachés*), and once the guns are lowered everything is quite correct. After some discussion (in English this time) we are even able to decline their invitation to accompany them to the station. The fun is not quite over yet, however, for the Hotel Oloffson is in its tactful way a fortress, though luckily not so secure as those in Pétionville, and we are obliged to go over the wall.

I wake next morning with a significant hangover and ears still throbbing with the Boukman drums. It's clear that the rainy season is over now, this minute; the air crackles with a heat which will not be abated. We attempt a Sunday morning stroll through Port-au-Prince, moving like swimmers through the gluey heat. For the first time I understand the old creole proverb, dating from slavery time: *doucement allé loin,* which translates roughly as "the gentlest way goes furthest." A necessary ethic for a slave, perhaps, this line was also one of Toussaint's favorite mottos, but now I feel it is more deeply rooted in the conditions of this country, because if you try to move fast or forcefully in this kind of heat you will be dead in fifteen minutes. Now I begin to understand the sinuous grace of the women who move through the streets with impossible burdens balanced on their heads, the tenuous persistence of the human cart-hauler dragging a coffin-size block of ice on a two-wheeled truck. Creole itself reflects this principle, requiring fewer, gentler movements of the tongue than French. Now I understand the foolishness of a clenched fist, as in my mind's eye I see Lôlô's open hands. I am no longer well able to distinguish causes from effects, but it seems to me that if we had not understood how *doucement allé loin,* Lôlô would never have appeared to bring us into the *lakou.*

In the *lakou* it was very cool and fresh, as if the sweltering heat of Port-au-Prince had never existed. Eight feet from where we stood in the packed-earth forecourt of a small cabin, a hummingbird spun its invisible wings in the air, beak communing with a blossom. Presently three small girls appeared at our knees and showed with their hands that they wanted to kiss us and for us to kiss them. In the *lakou* one is always greeted with a kiss, even if one is a stranger; one cannot be a stranger there for no stranger can enter the *lakou.*

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The distance from Port-au-Prince to the *lakou* is negligible in miles but enhanced by the fact that the closer you get the more the road becomes a sheer cliff. Lôlô's Jeep tapped out before we reached the top, and we took him and several others, who seemed to be functioning as an informal security team, along in ours. But the last leg of the journey must be made on foot, along a trail no more than shoulders-wide.

The cabins of the *lakou* are arranged along a looping path that goes up and down the mountain slope, describing an ellipse around the central *hounfor*, as dancers circle the *poteau mitan* in *vaudou* rituals, or during Boukman concerts. The dwellers here have found surprisingly rich veins of soil in the rock; there were ripening stalks of bananas and zigzag plantings of corn. The sense of natural abundance was like what we had seen in the fertile mountains above Cap Haïtien. There were chickens too, and pigs. Outside the cities, all Haiti is scattered with livestock, cows and runty pigs and goats which often wear wooden head stalls to keep them from raiding the gardens. But all these animals look thin and enterprising, for the people must eat before the animals do. In the *lakou*, for the first and only time, I saw a big *fat* hog.

Today we had Lôlô, not Theodore; the Sorbonne French was gone and he spoke to us in a mélange of French and creole, and did not speak much in any case. The *lakou* was, that day at least, a place of stillness. When we had made the circuit of the cabins, Lôlô opened the *case des mystères*, a small *ajoupa* made, like the other cabins of the *lakou*, by weaving sticks together and plastering them with mud. Within, the *vévés* of different *loa* were painted on the walls with a turquoise paint that had happened to be there, so that the space within seemed suffused with a cool blue light. Lôlô and the other *serviteurs* performed a simple ceremony, giving drink to the spirits who exist in small clay bottles on the altar.

The *hounfor* itself was a large ellipse of packed dirt along the edge of the sacred pool. A cow had lately been drinking there, but now the waters had stilled. It was astonishingly quiet. In Cap Haïtien the painters like to render the island as one with its reflection in the mirror of the sea, like a planet, like a globe. Regarding the mirror of the sacred pool, we seemed to be inside this sphere, the trees curving up above us and also below; we were embraced, suspended there. One began to feel Ginen, and the

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sense of peace was so profound that one could hardly bear to leave it.

Leaving the *lakou*, Lôlô spoke a little more, explaining the idea of *la colonne*. This column is the family tree, and the arrangement of the *lakou* is the outward reflection of this inner truth. Within this matrix of relationship, children are the responsibility of the whole village, as in Africa, not just the property of their parents. Indeed, *la colonne* stretches halfway down the mountain to Pétionville, and we made frequent stops for Lôlô to have conversations with his cousins, or if we did not stop he would flex a hand gently out the window and say hello and good-bye in the same breath with the creole phrase that means "We're here"—*Nou la.*

Nou la . . . but for how long? The air is crackling with heat, elections come at the end of the month, and back at the Hotel Oloffson, the staff turn away from a creole broadcast stiff with a tension no rain will relieve. If there is trouble, it may happen in three weeks, and at the airport I am relieved to be leaving Haiti, though in another way one would infinitely prefer to stay.

Four days away from the murder of his ex-officer friend, Lôlô must be aware of his own danger, though he never mentions it. In Haiti they assassinate both priests and *houngans* with a crushing regularity, and up the country there are still plenty of guns in the hands of the *attachés*. Lôlô is protected to some degree by his own precautions, to some degree by his reasonably high profile in the international press, and to some degree by the assassins' fear of making martyrs. It was that fear that kept Napoleon from executing Toussaint two hundred years ago, though Toussaint, who died in a French prison, became a martyr anyway.

It's conceivable that Theodore Beaubrun has some slight vocation for martyrdom, but I believe that Lôlô would see it differently. Certainly Boukman Eksperyans has structured things differently, for it is a group without a leader, and when there is no leader, the leader can't be killed. Also there are many groups besides Boukman Eksperyans. The death of the historical Boukman made no difference to the movement he had forged. As General Leclerc finally figured out, you give up or else you have to kill them all. In any case, the dead do not depart from Haiti, and Lôlô seems already well-versed in the art of living in eternity. Maybe it doesn't matter so much on which side of the mirror he finds himself residing.

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Another bloodbath in Haiti remains a lively possibility. The spiking of the Haitian army's sole artillery division is certainly a positive step, a true feather in the cap of the foreign intervention, but the army itself is only disbanded, not destroyed, and the U.N. effort to retrieve rifles from ex-military personnel seems to have been no more successful than Leclerc's attempt to get the guns back from the rebel slaves who founded Haiti. Without artillery, the next violent power struggle in Haiti, if it does come, will be carried out with small arms and machetes, like the civil war in Rwanda, which in its turn resembles the Haitian War of Knives.

Let us admit, however, that the foreign intervention has done some tangible good in Haiti. For the moment at least it has scotched the worst extremes of terrorism. Without the U.N. retraining effort and the continued U.N. presence, our encounter with the police would have been much, much more unpleasant (although I wonder how those officers would have handled a carload of black Haitians). The foreign presence has at least temporarily restored the popular voice of the Haitian people, and created forms of democratic process, yet one wonders if First World democracy will ever fit this country, if Haiti does not require something more on the order of the *konbit*, communal work parties rooted in the *lakou*, which Boukman Eksperyans sings about.

Eavesdropping on conversations at the Oloffson, trying to sleep in Graham Greene's old room while listening to chopper blades flogging overhead, it's hard to forget *The Quiet American*. It's hard to forget that the First World can destroy a culture more thoroughly with money and good intentions than with knives and guns. Our great weakness in the First World, and particularly in the States, is that whenever we look in a mirror we always assume we are seeing ourselves.

Haiti shows that there are some advantages to having been a pariah state for two hundred years. Port-au-Prince is a classic Third World slum, complete with its Cité Soleil where people starve in boxes, enduring famine conditions that resemble Somalia. But outside the cities a self-sustaining agrarian life seems at least marginally viable. Because tourism has been aborted in Haiti, comparatively few Haitians have been turned into beggars and waiters and hustlers and thieves. The archipelagos of discarded plastic that clog the seas around "successful" tourist

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islands don't exist in Haiti. Outside Cité Soleil, people don't live in shacks of discarded First World materials, tin and cardboard: they use centuries-old techniques to make houses out of daubed wood and thatch and woven palm leaves; they make most of what they need by hand. In the north, for instance, they still weave indescribably complex donkey saddles out of straw. It's a hard life, and one must not sentimentalize it, but one should also remember that there are worse alternatives. Remember, as Club Med prepares to reopen, that successful tourism in Haiti turned the country into the most appalling prostitution market in the Western Hemisphere and made it a major crossroads in the global spread of AIDS.

In the First World, we are always firmly situated inside our individual selves. In Haiti it's not at all that way. The difference can sometimes be annoying, as when the one who leaves the lug nuts on the ground is not the same one who in some other context would easily recognize their worth. But when it comes to forming communities it is better *not* to have such a strong sense of one's personal boundaries. Haitians are able to love and care for their children in ways now unimaginable in the First World, where fission has exploded most nuclear families, let alone anything that might once have resembled *la colonne.* A child may wander safely anywhere within the borders of the *lakou* because she enjoys the love and protection of all. Even in small-town America these days, a child alone is simply a target.

Haiti pour les Haïtiens, as angry crowds will sometimes shout outside the U.S. Embassy. There must be some alternative for this country to becoming a cheap-labor market for global corporations, to becoming another Caribbean tourist spectacle. Fish-farming, craft exports. Haitians make a sort of pistachio butter that would fly off the shelves of First World gourmet shops. Haitians make the best rum in the world—a five-star bottle compares favorably to Courvoisier or Calvados.

Flying over Haiti, one sees surprising things. I had assumed the country was a dust bowl now. Eighteenth-century reports already speak of overlogging and overfarming and the erosions and floods that resulted. Then there is the population bomb. In slavery time, the people died like flies, from mistreatment and murder and suicide. Mothers would abort, or kill their infants—out of love, to send them back to Africa. It was necessary for the

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slave masters to import twenty thousand slaves a year to maintain a constant work force. But after the revolution the people stopped dying, and I'd assumed that six million Haitians must have eaten up the whole country like a flight of locusts before now.

Not so. In the mountains above Gonaives and the Artibonite there is much erosion and the peaks are dry and bare. But the mountains above Cap Haïtien are still fertile, as we saw by land. By air we can see clouds blanketing the peaks, and know that there must be rich land below them. As we fly deeper over the interior, we see pockets of remarkable fertility. Down there, where there are no roads, there are *lakou* that can only be reached by horse or by foot. Surely there must be places left where you can go up the country with nothing more than a box of matches and a cane knife and not come back for a decade or so. One can imagine that, in the Cibao Mountains along the Dominican border, some rain forest may still survive. The land is wounded but not murdered yet, and the spirit of Ginen is still strong; the Boukman singers know that, but they are not the only ones who know. It is imaginable that after all the Haitian people will not be destroyed. Their roots are planted very deep, and they spring up everywhere.

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MICHAEL VAN WALLEGHEN

The Last Neanderthal

Browsing in the waiting room
through dog-eared TIME, he reads
how all over the world, frogs

are disappearing—a thinning
it's supposed, of the ozone . . .

and then it's his turn. Blood
pressure, prostate palpation . . .
followed by the usual questions:

Any . . . um . . . trouble getting it up?
Painful or bloody urination?

Not so far. But one day, he thinks
it could all be different. The light
becoming suddenly brighter, ominous

and the doctor frowning meanwhile
snapping off his rubber gloves . . .

After that, surgery, chemo-therapy
the rest of his life in diapers . . .
But for now, except for a niggling

slight elevation in blood pressure
he's OK and deserves a handshake:

Keep up the good work. Exercise.
And take this form to the front desk.
We need your group insurance number.

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And soon he's driving home again
curiously aware of the littered

roadside, the look of late March—
blossoms of Styrofoam and paper cups
shivering in the stiff, brown bushes

while overhead drift clouds of lead—
a sky that might rain anything:

dead dogs and cats for instance—
car junk, disemboweled sofas . . . even
the radio stinks. Continual static

interrupting a talk show of some kind.
Some paleo-anthropologist it seems

talking about our human origins—
and people calling in with questions:
What about those Neanderthals then?

Were they human or not? And why
if they were as smart as you seem

to think, did they all die out?
OK I'll hang up now and listen.
At which point, the station disappears

and there's nothing on the air again
but noise, a sound like leaves perhaps

rattling in an empty cave somewhere
along the Rhine . . . It's almost dark.
Nearby, the last Neanderthal hunkers

over a small fire, roasting a frog
on a stick. A man much like himself

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but bigger and covered with hair—
his low forehead wrinkled suddenly
by something he hears out there . . .

a car whizzing by in another dimension.
It's possible. If he can imagine it

why not? Meanwhile, the frog
looks almost done. A small frog
the size of a baseball or an enlarged

prostate maybe. He can see it clearly.
A middle-aged man much like himself.

Ghost

Coming in from the morning's run
sweaty but not tired, feeling better
really, than I have for years

adolescent, even, in my specific
and innocent thirst for orange juice
after three whole weeks of not drinking

I catch, just barely audible at first
over the cold hum of the refrigerator
an arrhythmic, suspicious fluttering

from down in the basement somewhere—
a frayed belt on the washing machine
a part working loose in the dryer . . .

followed by the unmistakable thump
of something soft hitting a window—
something alive and fluttering again

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in the ductwork above the furnace . . .
a bird of course. A starling finally
dragging a huge, claw-footed shadow

from window to window, wrestling it
from pipe to flue, croaking a little
in his terror, like one of the damned

who, having fallen in this instance
down the black hole of our chimney
finds himself floundering in the gloom

of another whole universe entirely—
an underworld of gray cement in fact
redolent of mildew, old laundry, dreams

in which I keep hearing tiny noises
and then find my dead brother again
hiding in the furnace with a shotgun.

Just now, however, in this wide-awake
absolutely sober, forty-watt flashback
of the actual suicide basement, he seems

to be a bird. As a child, I remember
he was always jumping off of things—
couches, porch rails, the garage roof . . .

so perhaps it's perfectly natural now
for him to be a bird, confused like this
with no memory at all of the old life—

neither the porch, nor the rose of Sharon
he sailed right over in his wash-towel cape.
Not his mother, not his father passed out

snoring on the swing. And not me certainly
watching my brother as he asked me to—
drinking my juice at the top of our steps.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

Spinach Days

The odor of cooking spinach
brings them back: Summer
evenings, the world's richest
city, Manhattan before my senior year,

when Cadillacs grew tailfins,
Buddy Holly and The Crickets alarmed
parents, Eisenhower full of wind,
Mamie tippling at the Gettysburg farm.

A bluechip ad agency awarded
me an "Internship." I was recruited
for a world I could not afford.
In my one wash-and-wear suit,

by day I worked in a skyscraper,
aluminum waterfall a lobby construct,
rooftop restaurant for highsteppers.
I wrote clever copy: HOOVER SUCKS

for a vacuum cleaner client,
PIMPLES CAN MAKE YOU RICH!
to druggists for an astringent.
My boss rebuffed my greatest pitch,

KISS YOUR PAINFUL HEMORRHOIDS GOODBYE,
though called it a good attempt.
By night I sweated in my room at the "Y,"
non-air-conditioned, ten dollars' weekly rent.

The one window overlooked an airshaft,
but not a whisper of air shafted there.

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I hung a repro of a Picasso lithograph
to make the cell less threadbare.

Rickety desk pushed tight against the bed,
but not so tight as my budget—
fifty-two dollars a week divided
between rent, food, books, cigarettes—

but not necessarily in that order.
Even then books took precedent:
A secondhand *Sorrows of Young Werther*
at The Strand meant total abstinence

at lunch. Dinners I was resigned
to the Horn & Hardart Automat.
Cheap entrees revolved behind
glass doors, or the vegetable platter—

any three off the steam table
for a total of forty-five cents.
I thought spinach would enable
me with Popeye's omnipotence.

It was mushy, foul, overcooked,
the water dark as octopus ink.
For the rest, mashed potatoes, crook-
neck squash, or corn. I was delinquent

in The Great Food Chain, but content.
Near pay day, no money even for spinach,
I let myself into my aunt's apartment
when she was away, quickly dispatched

whatever was in the Frigidaire,
hoping she wouldn't miss it, or
forgive. Dates were free: Washington Square,
The Cloisters, Natural History dinosaurs,

Lewisohn Stadium concerts where some wag
strung banners, EXIT IN CASE OF BRAHMS.

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Summer nights strollers could zigzag
through Central Park without a qualm,

or so I thought, amble through Harlem
back to the East Side, my date
swinging her handbag like a pendulum
past laughing Negroes who'd gravitate

to front stoops. (Not for decades will
we say Blacks, then Afro-Americans,
finally African-Americans. Nothing's still,
how many changes in a short life span.)

Spinach brings it back: Long showers
at the "Y," simply nothing else to do,
Dark Victory billed with *Now, Voyager*
at The Thalia, monkeys at the Bronx Zoo,

browsing that smörgåsbord for bibliophiles,
The Gotham, hoping to catch a rising star.
Never did, only fading James T. Farrell
imbibing at The Biltmore Men's Bar.

(The Biltmore Men's Bar! Even the name
is impossible today. But that was then.
All males, all crème de la crème,
leaned on the mahogany bar like denizens.)

I elevated atop The Empire State,
saw nothing but fog on foggy mist,
like the *White on White* immaculate
canvas at MoMA, post-Impressionist,

hung outside gated Patchen Place
waiting for Cummings to cross cobbles,
or Djuna Barnes. Neither showed face.
The White Horse, where Delmore hobnobbed,

I shared a pitcher of martinis (a pitcher!)
with two older, hard-drinking pals

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who were paying. I paid—a spectacular
hangover for days left me horizontal.

By August the city was a cement inferno.
My boss promised to get me away
to his family's Nantucket bungalow.
He never asked, not even by Labor Day.

One young man invited me to The Pines,
a place I'd never heard of or been.
Co-workers advised I should decline.
Instead I swam alone at the "Y," chlorine

stinging my eyes. (Stripling-shaped,
one-hundred-fifty pounds dripping wet,
the fat man inside me hadn't yet escaped.
Decades later he scored his upset.)

Hive-like corridors buzzed with queens
(no one knew the word Gays) cruising
in BVDs, one café au lait called Josephine
because of his effeminate languishing.

Locked in my oppressive room I wrote
parents dutifully, on sticky sheets
slept intermittently, dreaming anecdotes
of fame. I filled notebooks with meters,

not ads. Lines spilled like cataracts.
On occasion I wonder if I were misled.
But most days I think I would go back.
Spinach. Loneliness. The future ahead.

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ALLEN HOEY

The Winter of Little Snow

I

A seeming miracle!—several saplings
already budding in the woods behind the house.
And, as I bent the branch to let my son see,
I noticed a moth, plain, a ragged pearl, then
another and another. Mid-February,
yet I found myself saying, "See these buds?—
they mean spring is coming." Yesterday
morning's robin could not be a lie,
nor the straggling rafts already returning north,
yet the whole confusion of weathers
threatens the possibility of frost
rendering spring barren. I released the branch
and, before he trundled on, pointed out the green
underlay of moss through the mottled grass.

II

Despite the scarcity of snow, birds cluster the feeder.
The ground has not been frozen more than two weeks
all winter; what snow falls seems to melt
before it touches ground. And, although I understand
a certain paucity of seed is built into the system,
I find on walks through the adjacent field and woodlot
much untouched forage. These birds could illustrate
a principle of greed: why work when what comes
easiest is most at hand. And this feeder might signify
ways we corrupt self-sufficiency. Will these birds,
the daily congress of sparrows, chickadees, and bluejays,
the pair of cardinals and glossy hordes of starlings,

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be joined as the weather warms by the plenitude
of summer species? Given the many feeders,
the tons of seed strewn, how long before birds
lose the knack of culling seed wild?

III

We found a cat, car-struck and tossed up
on a sewer the far side
of the sidewalk. "It's dead," I told him,
and he leaned close, though careful,
as with the mole last summer the dog
killed, not to touch it. Its fur
matted, sockets clean, although it was
otherwise intact, fully
recognizable. His eyes widened
then narrowed. Widened. And he
did not, for a moment, say a word.
Today, in the woods, he said
he wanted to live with the cat, he
wanted to fix it. "It can't
be fixed; like the mole, it's completely
broken." A normal snowfall
would have hidden it, by spring reduced
the thing to a formless heap.
"Some things can't be fixed," I told him. Nor
even, often, kept concealed.

IV

"What's that?" Springs—an old mattress tossed
and rusting, rotting innards strewn
and rotting. Green, brown, and clear bottles,
broken and intact, some arranged on a root
against a washed-out bank; red plastic
shotgun casing, brass casings from .22s,
yellow belt from a rain slicker
knotted in a sapling, industrial orange tubing,

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cans rusting, aluminum cans which will not rust, which will
adorn this woodlot, though fading in sunlight
to dull silver-grey, longer than his life.
Come spring, taller grasses, blossoming
wildflowers, and full-leafed saplings will conceal
perhaps the worst; eyes, now plodding through
dull, snowless clearings, the stripped
regiment of hardwoods, will tend more surely
upward, drawn by sun-brightened greens:
how much snow matters! The fields in sunlight
sharp as quartz, delicate stalks of Queen Anne's lace
contrasting, and the silvered trees, the
anonymous sheer sparkle.

V

Six o'clock, March sixth: I've sat
since three watching night evaporate,
the birds start—with the first grey
hint of light—at the feeder, the grass
come green as April before
full dawn. Yesterday's shower melted
the last grey trace of snow
in the underbrush. Sixty degrees.
Spring should not come this early,
this easy. Fall's debris—seedpods,
leaves, twigs—lies nearly intact,
not enough snow or even rain to
start to rot it. Grass never
really browned; turned a little yellow
in November, lay under
a few brief snows, and now it brightens.
Four weeks to Easter; it seems
the Lord's been only drowsing, a pale
resurrection to waken
from a nap. No cold hell, no pain: spring
seems unearned. The sleep should be
deeper, at least, waking a greater
struggle. "Nature loves to hide,"

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Heraclitus writes, but hide-and-seek
  is best when difficult, when
the search lasts all day, and we wonder,
  come dusk, when finally someone
will call, "Olly-olly-all's-home-free!"
  —as if that simple chant might
release again the game to begin.

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CATHLEEN CALBERT

Silent Men

Who were they? That generation, those men. Such mysteries.
I believe that men were bigger then, their backsides wide,
their faces manly and mean, or sunken in within their own
miseries.

But all I have are fragments, details, sensory memories
of my father, who smelled of Wild Turkey, Old Spice,
Brillcream,
and something like a man's leather jacket worn in the rain

or the chamois he used to smooth over the curves of his cars.
What drove him? How could I decipher his devotions? I
know only
the periphery. He liked deep-sea fishing, coming home
loaded

down with the huge, bloody things that he clomped in the
house
and dumped in the sink, filling all of us with the smell of
blood
and fish and the sea. It's true it was good, the fresh catch

he folded in foil, baked in mayonnaise and lemons, the best
I've ever eaten. I believed in that flesh I tasted some of where
he'd been. But I couldn't be certain. He didn't take us with
him.

Who knew what such men did on their own? Not my mother,
who stayed at home. Nothing was told. He had his own room
with a lock, and he had a key he carried with him into the
world

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when he'd leave, sealing up the king-sized bed where he made
us
stay if we were bad on Saturdays, silenced fairy-tale children
who'd awoken the ogre from his drunken sleeping. Struck
dumb,

I watched the wallpaper, a lady's choice, all lilacs and tea roses,
stained yellow with his hair oil, and I wondered at his clutter
of male things: the *Playboy*s I would be punished for touching,

glass rings on the night-stand, glass ashtrays left heaping,
matches from The Red Lantern, The Spanish Gypsy, the ham
radio so
he could still play submarine, this sailor lost at sea, submerged

in a fatherhood born of unexpected pregnancies and believing
he could still somehow do the right thing, stranded though
he was in the suburbs of southern California, too far away

from the silent lakes of Michigan and a large, immigrant
family.
He'd run away at sixteen. At twenty, he rode his motorcycle
across
the country. In his fifties, he planted daffodils and served me

tiny highballs in glasses with naked ladies and racy sayings.
It's true a few times I too attempted to befriend him,
coquettishly plucking the Rice Krispie moles on his shoulder,

trying my tongue on "Daddy," and wondering what life would
be like
as a real daughter with a real father one could say such things
to
without that awful falsehood ringing through, for, truly,

I hated how he played with me, and I was already out of his
reach.
I froze in poses, falling in place in my own game of Statues.
I was Helen Keller. I was through the Looking Glass.

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As for him, I figured he must belong to the mob or
    something:
my mobster father who could ice his enemies. After all, he was
always standing at the edge of things, silent, shadowed,
    smoking,

an underworld figure whose family hated him coming home
dead-drunk, dark-eyed, angry, so when he did bang in,
we slunk off to the safety of our separate rooms

though a few times he seemed to think it was his duty
    to try
and teach us a thing or two, so he told my brothers,
who feared him, not to knock a girl up, and they never did,

and he told my sister, who loved him, she looked like a slut,
so she did, and he told me, though I wanted nothing to do
with him, I couldn't be trusted: I'd already been molested.

He tried to run over the boys after they'd been arrested.
At least, he trashed their mailboxes with his Grand Prix,
and it was their turn to call the police. What possessed him?

Did it hurt to have me spring past his hands, glancing
back fearfully, always running to my mother, who was
concentrating her life on hating him until she finally dyed

her hair red and got a job that let her be in a uniform and
    sleep
with a fireman, and we saw our father on obligatory visits
to his little bachelor pad, where he passed his evenings

making stupid things: mosaic ashtrays (the tiles arranged
into matadors and blue bulls), or his jokes like the plaque
of "The Family Jewels" (two walnut halves glued in place)

which he hung next to his old navy cartoons of dream girls:
"Broad on Starboard Bow" and "Saluting the Waves."
I believe I missed the meaning of these and many things,

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and I find at best I can just pen a silhouette of him,
the dark image of my girlhood dreams, to set before friends
when we puzzle through the pieces, sharing our stories

of the same drinking, silence, rage, that have left us
wondering, Who were they? Those men, that generation,
the fathers of such accomplished and such fucked-up
daughters.

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PATTIANN ROGERS

The Consequences of Death

You might previously have thought
each death just a single loss.
But when a plain gray titmouse dies,
what plunges simultaneously and disappears too
are all the oak-juniper woodlands,
the streamside cottonwoods, every elderberry
bush and high spring growth of sprouted
oak once held inside its eye.

And when a sugar pine splits, breaks
to the ground, falling with its fiestas
and commemorations of blue-green needles,
long-winged seeds, the sweet resin
of its heartwood, there's another
collapse coincident—a fast inward
sinking and sucking back to nothing
of all those stars once kept in its core,
those clusters of suns and shining
dusts once resident in the sky of its rigid
bark and cone-scales. We could hear
the sound of that galactic collapse as well,
if we had the proper ears for it.

And when a mountain sheep stumbles,
plummets, catapulting skull, spine,
from cliffside to crumbling rock below,
a like shape of flame and intensity
on a similar sharp ledge on the other side
of the same moment, out of our sense,
loses balance, goes blind.

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Because of these torn paper-shreds
of gold-lashed wings, this spangled
fritillary's death, somewhere behind the night
a convinced declaration of air and matter
and intention, silenced, speaks no longer
of the god of its structure.

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Hadrian Bereaved

The White Nile falls. Osiris dies.
Egypt wails under winter squalls.
In the embalmer's pungent halls
my lover's mummy lies,
marvel of mortuary art
with myrrh and spikenard in its veins.
A gold-enameled cask contains
the ashes of his heart.

I shall not slay my slaves for him.
Rather I'll found a cult of grief,
commissioning bronze and bas-relief
lest Stygian shadows dim
an old man's image of the dead.
Flushed with the sweat of victory,
he'll glisten in my memory
as I crown his tousled head.

The Mustard Seed Garden

Distant, the tumults of a passing age.
Heaven and the Jade Emperor dwell near,
and I could spend a profitable year
lost in the landscape on this yellowed page.
Perched on a verge between two twisted pines
teeters a thatch and bamboo hermitage.
On the veranda stands a Taoist sage

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who smiles benignly at the world's confines.
Drowned in the lake, unearthly mountains float
as a stray catspaw heels a fishing skiff.
In a pavilion shadowed by the cliff
a courtesan quavers a mournful note.
Crickets and frogs have hushed to hear her sing.
The sage and I stand spellbound, listening.

The Drunken Sage

An old pine is entwined with vines.
Lolling under its twisted trunk,
a monk is gloriously drunk.
He has no taste for vintage wines
prized by the Manchu Emperor.
Contemplating the world's distress
and love's exquisite bitterness,
he sips a cup of vinegar.

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ROBIN S. CHAPMAN

The Blue Hat

Now, while so many of our daughters are dying
Because they are not thin or young
Or beautiful enough, it is the blue hat
I want to explain, a royal blue fedora
That I bought because I knew Betty,
Fashion coordinator of the town's largest department store
Who dressed in *Vogue* magazine styles and feather boas
In the middle of Tennessee hills
And denim-dressed Unitarian wives.
Betty wept at the beauty of her husband Arthur's sermons
And decorated her Christmas tree with red velvet ribbons
And came to Mom's funeral in a black Homburg
With Chantilly lace drape and silk pajamas
And a choker of crystals—

Betty, who was the first to have watermelon placemats
And real candles in a wrought-iron chandelier,
Who looked me over as I swung my legs
On the turquoise loveseat and said to Mother,
What are we going to do with her?
Betty told me I would be beautiful
With the right clothes and a little older
And gave me a cashmere sweater for college
And false eyelashes for graduate school
And said sex was wonderful

And when a stroke shut Arthur down
Except for a little roar he could make
Sometimes when he heard her voice on the phone,
Betty believed that behind his immobile face
And arms and legs his mind raced on,
Got 24-hour-a-day care and a hospital bed,

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Played "MacNeil-Lehrer" news and his favorite videos
Every evening, wearing her best red negligee
To climb in bed with him for an hour or two,
Tell him about her day, the way she'd chat
With her friends at work about what Arthur had thought
Of the last foreign film or the latest political news,
For seven years before he died;
This blue hat honors Betty.

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STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT

Coyote

It's mid-afternoon, and a coyote, tan
as the dust of fallen aspen leaves,
is crossing the west pasture, eyeing me
as he runs, head curled back
over the right shoulder, trusting
the way is clear and straight ahead.

The dry brome strokes his sides,
his underbelly, his upcurved muzzle:
I watch it bend, wave and wake,
as his slender body parts the shafts.

Later this same coyote (we will know him
by his ragged ear) will cross the wrong field,
unwary, strike a fresh diagonal across
a neighbor's backlot filled with wildflowers,
with sage and mullein, spiderwort.

The first shot downs him, tearing
through left flank, soft ivory undercoat,
shatters the pelvis so he cannot stand.
Half-submerged amid the flowers,
he digs front claws into warm clay, draws
his body forward toward the rising moon.

The second shot fills the silence
of late September, expanding in the quiet
like thunder unanticipated; the second shot
shatters his skull, ruins the butter-colored fur,
the deep and glossy pupils behind grey lids
that will not rise again. The second shot
hangs in the air, brooding over the sharp
cry it cannot wholly silence.

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PATRICIA GOEDICKE

Montana Pears

In the middle of Montana eating.
What the man sliced for them, two pears on a plate
sprinkled with bottled lime juice
and sugar.

His fork. Then hers. Spearing up
naked, white to sour green
chunks of moonless November's
cold orchards.

Tired, both of them.
On the thick, green
chemically textured part nylon
and wool sofa.

The man's comfortable
beige sweater bulges
next to the woman stuffed
into cheap stretch pants, a faded
apple red tee shirt.

Eighty years old.
And sixty. Add or
subtract a few. What have they been doing
all those years?

You, out there in the dark,
don't be afraid.
See, they're all lit up for you, do you
know them? I don't,

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and I'm stage manager here. In fact,
I'm one of the actors.

A tape purrs in the background.
The man forks up
the last piece of pear and puts it
in the woman's mouth

as Mark Daterman's electric guitar wheedles
over Glen Moore's acoustic bass in
The Blimp Wars, two state-of-the-art
instruments plucking, twining around each other.

The next piece they play is named after William
Carlos Williams' *The Great Figure*, in gold
reedy overtones, crackling halos of twanged
glowing noise, but then Daterman

and Moore stop playing, the man
says something, the woman nods,
thanks the man for the pears, I think he
thanks her for the music.

Pleased, both of them
peer at their books again.
But even the smartest, new
chemical preservatives can't help:

crushed, folded in on themselves
like sausages,
all the orchards are dark now, cold
shadowy fruit lumped
in heaps on the bare ground.

Silence. Then she stretches,
tucks her stockinged feet
in his lap. He strokes them

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without looking, pauses
every once in a while to stare, rub his eyes
with the back of his hand. Well,

it's ten o'clock.
Soon they'll be going to bed.
Does the telephone ring? Doesn't anyone
recognize them? You, out there in the dark,
look in at the two of them,
glowing.

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BERT CARDULLO

Family Affairs

DOMESTIC DRAMA HAS BEEN A STAPLE OF THE THEATRE at least since the eighteenth century, and of the cinema since its inception, which means that if you're going to write or film one (and you're serious), you had better have something new or different to say about the subject or at least a novel way in which to restate the old. Minorities and gays themselves as the subjects of family drama—this is something relatively recent. But too often the only difference between mainstream domestic works and the minority kind is the race, ethnicity, or sexuality of the main characters and their *auteur*. That is, the names or colors or couples have changed but the game remains the same, and that game is melo- or sentimental drama, each of which oversimplifies the world.

For a serious investigation at this time of the possibilities or parameters of domestic drama in England and the United States, we must turn to two white males treating mostly Caucasian characters. In the case of the American writer and director David O. Russell, these characters come from the middle class and live in suburbia. In his first feature film, *Spanking the Monkey*, Russell has chosen as his subject not domestic violence but domestic love, specifically incest. He is not the first filmmaker to venture into this taboo area, but he's probably the first to treat incest as a dark comedy. Louis Malle treated it as a light, even jazzy one in *Murmur of the Heart* (1971), whereas Bernardo Bertolucci regarded it with an operatic eye in the heavy-handed *La Luna* (1979).[1] What these three movies have in common, however, is that they all treat mother-son incest, which is the second most frequent after father-daughter.

I know of no major full-length fictional film, not even in our own uncensored era, that centrally depicts father-daughter incest, or that portrays it as anything other than abhorrent and its perpetrator as anything but depraved. Somehow, mother-son incest is more palatable to movie audiences, probably because of the sexist view, on the part of men as well as women, that females engage in sex exclusively as an act of love and nurture, never lust and exploitation. Thus mother-son incest can be housed in a coming-of-age story and be seen, no matter what the tone of the film may otherwise be, as the teenaged boy's sexual initiation by the person who cares the most about him: his dear old mum. *Murmur*

[1] Even Pasolini got into the act with his *Oedipus Rex* (1967), which is faithful to Sophocles' tragedy but has a prologue and epilogue set in modern times.

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of the Heart, La Luna, and *Spanking the Monkey* are all coming-of-age stories, but they are also tales of incest, and it is as such that they either succeed or fail artistically.

Spanking the Monkey succeeds, largely because it makes the incest between mother and son, with its concomitant "murder" of the father, sociologically relevant as well as psychologically plausible. This film is not a lurid account of aberrational behavior, but rather as much an emblematic account of its generation ("X"), indeed its era, as *The Graduate* (1967) and *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) together were of theirs. It also has the virtue of featuring an Italian-American family without once making reference to anything Italianate about it, which is one way to suggest the rootlessness or unfamilial quality of assimilationist American life. Raymond Aibelli is the son and only child of this American family, and we find him at the start returning home to Danbury, Connecticut, after his first year of pre-medical study at M.I.T. Ray plans to be home only a few days before heading to Washington, D.C., for a summer internship in the Surgeon General's office, but his father insists that he remain at home for over a month nursing his bedridden mother—less because Tom wants a loving family member to look after his wife than because he's pinching pennies and would rather not hire a real nurse. Susan Aibelli has a badly broken leg suffered in a fall (while she was trying to kill herself?), and her husband must (wants to?) leave on an extended sales trip.

In addition to taking care of his mother, Ray is ordered to look after his father's beloved dog, Frank; to mow the lawn, tend the garden, clean the house, do the cooking, wash the clothes; and, perhaps above all, never to use his dad's car for his own pleasure. So much for the son's summer-vacation-cum-résumé-building internship. Instead, Ray becomes a slave to numbing domestic routine, which David O. Russell insists on showing in detail, not so much because he thinks that environment determines behavior as because *this* banal environment, with its planned neatness and even preciosity, is a superficial reflection of the shallow self-absorption of its inhabitants' lives. In other words, character here seems to have determined setting, and Michael Mayers' cinematography emphasizes this point by subduing the richness of natural color, as if that color were filtered through jaded eyes, even as Pamela Martin's editing stresses the same point by regularly isolating family members in cloying close-up as opposed to overpowering long shot.

Ray's stifling isolation is increased by two factors. First, as the former high-school valedictorian, he's regarded as a nerd and therefore alternately shunned and patronized by males his age in Danbury; the one girl he meets while walking the dog, a jejune high-school student and psychiatrist's daughter named Toni, is interested in him but his interest in her seems limited to sex, which he never manages to get. Second, since his mother is bedridden with her cast and therefore can do very little for herself, Ray has to stay at home most of the time to assist her.

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However resentfully, he must empty her bedpan, coax her to eat, help her to shower, massage her feet and legs, and keep her supplied with pain pills as well as vodka tonics. Susan is an attractive, intelligent woman in her early forties who is also bored and lonely; she spends her time in bed watching "medical TV" as small compensation for the medical career she sacrificed in order to marry Tom. (He wanted marriage without children but, in return for Susan's agreeing not to attend medical school, he let her bear Raymond.) Frustrated at the loss of his summer internship and by the restrictions his father has placed upon him, the wiry, intense Ray spends what little free time he has at home working on an article about pediatric AIDS together with the essay that will accompany his future medical-school application.

He also unsuccessfully spends time trying to work off the natural heat of a nineteen- or twenty-year-old, not only with Toni but also through masturbation (the movie's title is twentysomething slang for male masturbation), which Frank the dog, the natural extension of his father, keeps comically interrupting by barging into the bathroom. When Ray finally does achieve orgasm, it's with his mother after an evening of television, massage, and vodka tonics for two. I emphasize Ray's "achievement of orgasm" as opposed to his "having intimate relations" because his is an essentially selfish or self-gratifying act, just like his attempted masturbation, not an intemperate expression of mother-love. The same is as true of Susan as of Ray, which is one reason she doesn't seem to feel any horror at what she's done. Ray for his part appears to be left feeling less horrified than unclean and unsated by the act.

First he showers twice and brushes his teeth; then later, his sexual appetite whetted, he engages in foreplay with Toni in his room before his mother interrupts in rage at her son's violation of the family rule against having sex with girls at home(!). So after Toni leaves, Ray promptly attempts to rape Susan but stops short of penetration. He tries again without success after nearly hanging himself in the bathroom, although it is unclear whether he does the latter out of a genuine desire to commit suicide—from one point of view, the ultimate act of self-gratification—or in a bizarre attempt at sexual stimulation. In a final attempt simultaneously to cleanse, thrill, and kill himself, he leaps from a cliff into a lake after smoking marijuana late one night, only to find himself crawling ashore alive. The last we see of him, in a scene recalling the ending of *Five Easy Pieces*, the wet and dishevelled Ray hitchhikes a ride with a grizzled old trucker and disappears into the morning, which is all that he was really trying to do through suicide in the first place: sever self from family, or immortalize self at the expense of family.

Even so unfamilial a family as this, whose father consorts with prostitutes on the road as compensation for a stale marriage and stalled sales. Ironically, Tom Aibelli is a purveyor of self-help videos, a business he wants his son to join in lieu of returning to high-priced M.I.T. for his sophomore year. This father returns home just once during *Spanking the Monkey*, apparently only to check on his dog and his car and to expel

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Aunt Helen from his house. She has been coming over to help with the cooking and cleaning, despite the fact that she has her own family to look after and that Ray and Susan treat her with barely veiled contempt; but Tom calls his sister(-in-law?) psychotic, and so her sweet selflessness must seem to a narcissist like him. Appropriately, he hears about the incestuous act during a long-distance telephone conversation with Ray, after which we never hear from him again. Tom is no villain, however, no knowing or calculating egoist. Rather, he comes off as a desperate man trapped inside a life the origins of whose disaffection escape him.

Susan Aibelli is perhaps more knowing than her husband, but she can hardly be called a harpy. She does manage to give sex to her son as well as get it from him, she does resist him when he twice comes back for more (although she may be resisting the manner rather than the matter of his carnal embrace), and her editing of Ray's medical essays is designed to help him in addition to gratifying her. Even her seemingly jealous disapproval of Toni has its wryly positive side: Susan knows that this book-smart pubescent, who has a thoroughly normal relationship with her father, is not the girl for her son. Nor is anyone else, really, for Ray is alone in a truck at the end just as he was on a bus at the beginning. He is neither in search of himself nor of an ideal other, in contrast to the Jack Nicholson character from *Five Easy Pieces,* which was made when the search for love and identity seemed to matter more. Coming of age for Raymond Aibelli merely means playing out his naked instinct for survival coupled with his blind ambition for success. That ambition is epitomized by his answer to his mother's question, "Why are you so interested in pediatric AIDS?" "It's the next big thing," declares the budding doctor.

The darkness in *Spanking the Monkey* obviously derives from its portrayal of incest, but incest here is not an isolated or freak occurrence (if it ever is), as I've attempted to show. It's the ultimate product of familial dysfunction, and that dysfunction is the real darkness in this film's dark comedy, for it points to a darkness that we can all recognize in American society as a whole: the cult of self as opposed to the devotion to family, the most significant of others. Because of our social and geographical mobility, coupled with our obsession with material success, we Americans more than most nationalities have become physically separated from our families as well as spiritually separated from the idea of family, by which I mean the catholic *value* of family and not conservative "family values." Hence one explanation for the dramatic rise in divorce: it's easier to get one these days, yes, but that's because more couples want one, and more couples want one because increasingly the experience of living together as a genuine family is foreign to them. The only thing that keeps the Aibelli family, or two of its three members, "together" for a summer is Susan's broken leg, otherwise Ray would have headed to Washington just as his father heads for the road. Each member seems more or less to live for himself to the exclusion of others in the immediate, let alone extended, family, and

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thus as a unit they can be called "nuclear" only in the destructive sense of that word.

Yet the film chronicles their self-destruction with comedy: sometimes with comedy that derives from the combining of grimness with cliché, as when Ray's recent past flashes before his eyes and ours as he ostensibly jumps to his death; at others with comedy that derives from the combining of grimness with irreverence. For instance, Ray proves to his father that he has slept with his mother by revealing that Susan has a birthmark shaped like a shopping cart on her buttock. And at the doctor's office the day after the incestuous deed, another mother complains to Susan that her own son is like all the other "grungy boys": never satisfied with what he gets, in his case a pair of shoes as opposed to (the apt term) a piece of ass. The premise of such black comedy, as applied here to the disintegrating family but frequently in the cinema to war, is that laughter is the only sane or soothing response to the horror of its subject, or to the dreadfulness of previous as well as present melo-sentimental treatments of that subject, be it domestic welfare or international warfare.

Fortunately, the acting in *Spanking the Monkey* is no laughing matter, and it well could have been in a film that cost only $80,000 to make. Jeremy Davies (Raymond), Alberta Watson (Susan), and Benjamin Hendrickson (Tom) are true to the characters as David O. Russell wrote them, to their denseness as well as dailiness, not to their attitudes about those characters or their ideas of how to make them more (or less) appealing. Think of, say, Michael J. Fox, Sally Field, and Richard Crenna in these roles a few years back and you'll get a picture of how badly this movie could have misfired. That misfiring could have included overburdening music but did not, thanks to Russell's prescience. His film has no contemporary rock score, nor even a dated one from a sixties singer-songwriter like Phil Ochs, whose music—and suicide—Ray knows about; there's just some alternately spunky and spiritless guitar accompaniment supplied by a group appropriately named "Morphine." Just as important, Russell eschews the kind of arty camera work designed to make us feel we're entering a weird world. This is *our* world, every element of this important little big film tells us.

Ken Loach tells us about our world, too, the working-class one whose members liberal politicians like to portray as the helpless victims of capitalism and conservatives as its pathological dregs. Loach hasn't always told the truth, having preferred earlier in his career in such a film as *Family Life* (1971) to deliver up socialist propaganda. But recently, in *Riff-Raff* (1993) and *Raining Stones* (1994) and now *Ladybird, Ladybird,* this British director has taken to examining the lives of the underclass in incriminating as well as extenuating detail, rather than using those lives as mere embodiments of some social tendency or typifications of a political idea. The subject of *Ladybird, Ladybird* is related to that of Loach's *Poor Cow* (1967), which investigated the sexual mores of the urban poor through the example of a promiscuous London wife, but it

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goes beyond this work in its consideration not only of single—perhaps a better word here would be multiple—motherhood, but also of domestic violence and the dramatic clash between impoverished or deprived families and Britain's welfare bureaucracy.

At the film's center stands Maggie Conlon, the complex character of Maggie as opposed to the artificial construct or conduit. A sometime pub singer in her thirties, she grew up in Liverpool but now lives in East London. A month before the movie begins, Maggie had her four children (two of them black) by four different men taken away from her by social services. When we meet her, she's explaining why in a bar to Jorge, a Paraguayan political exile and self-styled poet, in addition to filling in other details about her past. A flashback to Maggie's childhood reveals that her father was physically abusive toward her mother and, we later learn, sexually abusive toward her (incest again). Another flashback shows her in a violent relationship with Simon, the last in a series of abusive lovers; so violent was this man that Maggie had to flee with her kids to a women's shelter. While there she goes out on a singing engagement one night after locking the children into a room for their own protection. A fire breaks out at the refuge, her eldest son, Sean, is badly burned, and he and his siblings are summarily removed from their mother's custody by the government agency responsible for child welfare. Maggie is told that she can be reunited with her charges if she stays at a family detention center (where she can be observed in her dealings with them), but instead she attempts with Simon's help to kidnap her own children. The police stop them, however, and Maggie is permanently denied access to her brood by the courts.

So Maggie is a naturalistic victim of her past, perhaps too pat a case study in the deleterious effects of heredity and environment. But she obstinately persists rather than pathetically succumbing—this is why her story, which is based on fact, interested Loach—and Jorge helps her to persist. He responds not only to her warm sexuality but also to her deep feeling for children, having himself been the director of an orphanage for the offspring of slain political prisoners back in Paraguay; and Maggie responds to his gentleness and emotional need. In time they move into a council flat (but do not marry) and have a daughter, with Jorge taking a job as a fast-food cook—the only one he could find as an alien whose visa has expired. And in time Jorge discovers in the present what we learned about Maggie in flashback: that she is her own worst enemy, an extremely volatile and quarrelsome person whose character is as much responsible for her domestic crisis as the state's interventionist policy. Thus when a health care worker comes to check on the new baby, Maggie at first refuses to let her in, then later verbally abuses the woman before kicking her out—exhibiting this behavior despite the fact that, as a doting mother with a caring mate, she should have nothing to fear. She reacted similarly in the past to the foster mother who generously took the burn-victim Sean into her home, as well as to the social workers who urged that she check herself into the family detention center. Even

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as she lost her first four children, then, she loses her fifth: the police take the baby away at the behest of social services, a behest expedited by the false testimony, given by a neighbor whom Maggie had insulted, that Jorge beats his partner.

But nothing stops this woman, who goes on to have a sixth child after the British government elects to grant Jorge political asylum instead of deporting him. Jorge, you see, knows only too well how to negotiate with the authorities, not out of cowardice, as Maggie accuses and for which she strikes him, but out of the need to survive. That "diplomatic" skills honed in a dictatorial nation shouldn't be out of place in a free country like England is not Loach's facile equation of two apparently disparate political systems, but rather his pointed commentary on Jorge's ability (which Maggie clearly does not share) to learn from his experience. In any event, his skills do Maggie no good, at least not during *Ladybird, Ladybird*'s 100 minutes: in a harrowing scene, child-welfare agents seize her newly-born baby from her right in the hospital, after which a doctor sedates the hysterical Maggie as if she were a breeding animal.

Which, to British social services, she seems to be; and although these services are shown by Loach and his screenwriter, Rona Munro, to be imperfect, they are not shown to be villainous. It's very difficult indeed to dismiss out of hand their conclusion that Maggie is an unfit (if not unloving) mother, given her precarious financial state, violent temper, and promiscuous sex life. *Ladybird, Ladybird* does take its title, after all, from the nursery rhyme about children in peril. It's equally difficult to quarrel with Maggie's right to pursue happiness as she sees fit, which for her real-life counterpart, a closing title tells us, included remaining with Jorge and bearing three more children—children that, for the poor, are often regarded less as a financial burden than as a simultaneous source of self-expression and spiritual wealth. These last three kids she was allowed to keep, presumably because of the evidence that her relationship with the kindly Jorge was a long-term and relatively stable one; the previous six she is prohibited by law from ever seeing again.

When we see Maggie for the final time in the film, her hand gently reaching into the frame to join Jorge's, she quietly contemplates the painful likelihood of permanent separation from her young. She is not defeated, however, and we don't need the closing title to know that. Even without it, we could guess that this woman would blindly persist, with Jorge or another man, in having children until the government either sterilized her or let her keep one; would get on with her life as best as she could, without self-consciously judging herself or lamenting her membership in the lowest of social classes. That, as Ken Loach knows, is the province of art and intellectuals. He has created a tragic dilemma in *Ladybird, Ladybird*, not an argument for Maggie Conlon and against social services. And he has not resolved that dilemma with the information that the real Maggie was permitted to keep her next three children. For these children may be "at risk" in the company of their natural mother, despite the mollifying presence of Jorge, while the

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other six may be leading far healthier lives under the shepherding of British social services.

Crissy Rock, a stand-up comedienne in her native Liverpool, is Maggie, and I hope I never see her again. Ironically, this is the highest compliment I can pay Ms. Rock, for her performance is so convincing in its alternation of terrifying passion and touching intimacy that, somewhat selfishly, I don't want it spoiled or qualified by any additional acting she might do. Vladimir Vega, the Chilean musician who plays Jorge, has the less spectacular, even stock role—the voice of reason in the midst of chaos—but with the help of Loach, that master director of nonprofessionals, he has rendered Jorge's tender mercies with a manifold color and homely charm that Raul Julia could only dream about. Mr. Vega's work is matched by Barry Ackroyd's cinematography, which as usual performs the cooling function in a Ken Loach film by highlighting the blacks and blues and grays of the workers' world without sacrificing its color. Ms. Rock's performance, by contrast, is reinforced by Jonathan Morris' editing, which frequently uses close-ups, not to suffocate the characters, but to convey the heat of the moment—the up-closeness of their lives—or to extract that heat from the actors' faces. For relief from or distance on the drudgery of existence, Maggie and her friends turn to the self-expression of song (we hear such numbers as "Ain't Nothin' Goin' On But the Rent" and "Up Where We Belong"), never to the vicarious experience of the cinema.

Maggie and Jorge aren't self-absorbed, like the characters of *Spanking the Monkey*, they're starved for self-validation or validation of their union. And one of the ways they attempt to achieve it is through creating children in their own image—just the opposite of Tom and Susan Aibelli, who barely had one child and can barely tolerate each other. For all their problems, Maggie and Jorge at least have love—of each other and of family—on their side and fight to stay together. The Aibellis have only self-love going for them, and that's the problem: it's driving them apart. Of these two domestic dramas, the Aibellis' is the more horrible on reflection, and not for the obvious reason that it deals with incest, but for the less obvious one that it deals in desolation. That is why David O. Russell fashioned it as a dark comedy, for without the humor *Spanking the Monkey* would be unbearable, revolting, debasing. *Ladybird, Ladybird* has little if any humor, not even of the anarchic kind to be found in *Riff-Raff* and *Raining Stones*, and that is because it doesn't need such humor: the bleakness of its vision is already tempered by the blissfulness or blessedness of human devotion.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Cross-Gender Casting

PLAYING THE OPPOSITE SEX IS AS OLD AS THEATRE. Male actors played women in ancient Greece and Rome, in Elizabethan England, in Mandarin China. Traditional Japanese theatre had all-male companies; even today, some Japanese still believe that only a man can embody the ideal of pure femininity of the *onnagata* role in Kabuki.

Women playing men has a less venerable tradition, but goes back further than you might think. When women were at last allowed on stage in England after the Restoration of 1660, they turned the tables on Elizabethan custom by playing male as well as female roles. Some of the best actresses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appeared as men; for example, in the mid-1800s, the first American-born actress of the top rank, Charlotte Cushman, played Iago and Romeo, the latter to her sister Susan's Juliet. Some fifty professional actresses in the nineteenth century are known to have played Hamlet, including Sarah Bernhardt. These performances were not seen as gimmicks. "The modern sense of . . . cross-dressed portrayal as a stunt or trick, a dog walking on its hind legs, seems to be a matter of cultural relativism," writes Marjorie Garber in her recent book *Vested Interests.* Before the modern era, critics treated such portrayals seriously, on their own terms, without reference to the cross-gender casting. Cushman's male characterizations were praised for their sweep and power. Bernhardt's subtle and complex Hamlet was recorded as one of her greatest roles, lasting six months in Paris, an extraordinary run for its time.

The "cultural relativism" of our own time sees acting in terms of personality; the actor is supposed to play only himself or herself on stage or in film, a continuation of the likeness exhibited in talk shows, interviews, and everyday behavior. Critics do not discuss characterization, since a performer's character not only does not vary from role to role, but blurs the distinction between art and life. Thus, Meryl Streep's use of accents—standard stuff in the history of acting—is scorned as an evasion of "real" acting, inappropriate for a movie star. James Earl Jones's performing in Ibsen was seen as misguided, Dustin Hoffman's female role in *Tootsie* as bizarre—as if he were the first male ever to portray a woman. Interracial casting is bad enough—classical roles should be limited to whites!—but cross-gender casting goes against nature itself.

Fiona Shaw, one of England's finest contemporary stage actresses, attempted to break the gender barrier by portraying Shakespeare's

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Richard II at the National Theatre in London last summer. The results were illuminating. Her performance, like the production itself, had its flaws, but inadequate characterization was not among them. Shaw, a lean, angular woman with a sharp, jutting jaw, is not particularly attractive, but has large, intelligent, expressive eyes, and great vitality on stage. She generally plays strong women—Electra, Rosalind in *As You Like It,* Hedda Gabler—but her performance in 1993 as the pathetic heroine of Sophie Treadwell's Expressionistic *Machinal* was affecting, winning both of London's major Best Actress awards.

Shaw depicted Richard, a weak character if there ever was one, as a swaggering teenager, full of sentiment and bluster, but in over his depth in politics. The historical Richard II was actually in his early thirties during the events the play depicts, but Shakespeare makes him younger. Characters blame his flaws on his youth:

> The King is come. Deal mildly with his youth,
> For young hot colts being rag'd do rage the more.

Shaw played the opening scene, in which Bolingbroke and Mowbray accuse each other of treason, very casually, lounging about impatiently, as if anxious to get back to some game. Only in the third scene, in which the two accusers face each other in trial by mortal combat, did Shaw's Richard begin to grow up. Richard breaks off the duel just as it is about to start. Shaw motivated this by depicting deep feeling for young Bolingbroke, even kissing him strongly on the mouth; suddenly realizing that his friend may die, Richard at last takes the duel seriously, but can only respond petulantly, banishing both combatants.

The kiss expressed the homosexual undercurrent that runs through the play. The tendency nowadays is to turn such undercurrents into Niagara Falls, but the production avoided such excesses. The words "homosexual" and "homosexuality" did not exist in Shakespeare's day; although he certainly understood male bonding in all its aspects, including the erotic, he never presents a character whom we can explain away with a clinical label. Richard's attachment to males is simply a part of his complex makeup; Shakespeare also gives him a devoted wife of whom he is very fond, as we see in the scene in which they are forced to part.

Shaw played the departure scene with straightforward tenderness, adding to our sense of a character whose surplus of feeling is unfortunately linked to undersupply of judgment. Richard grows in wisdom and stature after he is deposed, but remains forever self-centered and peevish; there is spiritual growth, but of a lower magnitude than, for example, King Lear's. Shaw got the arc of the character very well, depicting Richard's suffering and wry irony but never completely losing the callowness of the opening scene.

Alas, her solid characterization was undermined by her inept delivery of Shakespeare's verse. Her way of showing emotion was to chop up the

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pentameter lines into three or four little chunks, destroying their rhythm and beauty. For example, accepting Richard's inevitable downfall, she stammered, "Must he . . . be depos'd? / The King . . . shall be . . . contented. . . . Must he lose . . . / The name . . . of king? A God's name, let it . . . go." Two lines into this magnificently balanced, rhetorical passage and the poetry was long dead. Richard is the most poetic role in Shakespeare; even Hamlet cannot match some of his speeches for sheer loveliness. As Richard comes more and more under stress, he responds not by hemming and hawing, like a hero in a modern naturalistic play, but by becoming more lyrical. Even as he is dying, he expresses himself in a fastidious couplet:

> Mount, mount, my soul. Thy seat is up on high,
> Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward here to die.

With Shaw's sputtering of the lines, Richard's soul, instead of mounting, lagged grossly and fleshily behind. It was a realistic death as portrayed by a modern nonbeliever.

David Threlfall as Bolingbroke was a good match for Shaw, even resembling her in face, hair, and complexion. A strong character actor best known for his Smike in the famous Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Nicholas Nickleby*, he delivered a performance that was sensitive, athletic, and intense, but infected with the ubiquitous stammers. Like him, most of the rest of the cast alternated a slow, sententious delivery with blurting and hesitating. An audience unfamiliar with the text would never have known that it was written in verse. (Since it took nearly four hours to perform, they might also have supposed the text to be very long, when it is actually one of Shakespeare's shorter tragedies, two-thirds the length of *Hamlet*.) Only Struan Rodger as Northumberland and Michael Bryant as York spoke fluidly and rhythmically,[1] but even Bryant's performance seemed sluggish, as well as lacking in humor, in a character whose fatuousness anticipates Polonius.

Cross-gendering in the production extended to its direction, by Deborah Warner. Directing on stage, as in film, has long been an almost all-male profession, but now some of the best directors in England are women. Warner, Phyllida Lloyd, and Katie Mitchell (see below), are doing the most interesting work there today, often of difficult plays under challenging circumstances. The tiny Cottesloe Theatre at the National would not be my first choice of venue for directing one of Shakespeare's large-cast, panoramic plays. Warner staged *Richard II* shrewdly, situating the audience on two sides of a central runway. This was particularly effective for the confrontation scenes that abound in the play, and also set up entrances well. (Shakespeare, writing before the

[1] I give my student actors one of York's lines as a test of their knowledge of Shakespearean verse: "His face still combating with tears and smiles." Where do you put the stresses? Bryant knew the answer.

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age of theatre programs, typically announces a character—"Here comes the Duke of York"—to help the audience keep everybody in the large cast straight.) The combat scene, always a dud in productions I had seen previously, was tremendously exciting, as we waited for the two combatants to rush at each other from either end of the stage. Intimate scenes were less effective; it was hard for two or three characters to huddle together and still be visible from both sides of the audience, so that the actors sometimes had to perform farther apart than made sense.

Hildegard Bechtler's costumes were mostly plain long tunics in gray, brown, or black, which set off the actors' variegated faces wonderfully, recalling paintings by Bruegel or Bosch. The overall effect was lackluster, however; Richard himself was dressed all in white, with a doublet hanging open over a loose linen shirt, and long, wrinkled slacks—hardly kingly attire. With Peter Mumford's harsh lighting, this *Richard II* became very much a production of our time, loaded with conflict and psychology, but short on poetry or pageantry. Fiona Shaw should definitely try some of Shakespeare's other male roles, such as Prince Hal or Hamlet. Trained at RADA, she has, like most British actors, a perfectly good stage voice; next time, I hope that she will use it better.

Alternating with *Richard II* at the Cottesloe Theatre in late summer was Katie Mitchell's production of Ernst Toller's 1922 Expressionist drama *The Machine Wreckers.* Mitchell has previously directed a number of productions in the small theatres of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Sometimes, the results have been superb, especially her *Woman Killed with Kindness*[2] and *Henry VI, Part 3.* There is nothing wrong with small theatre spaces per se, if plays are chosen carefully; large casts, multiple scenes, and even military conflict can all be depicted effectively if handled with imagination and skill. Some plays, however, can only function on a grand scale. Mitchell's *Ghosts* fizzled at the end because there was no way to depict the panorama of mountains and glaciers that Ibsen calls for; her *Dybbuk* looked awkward because Ansky's play often has multiple focus, with differing events happening simultaneously on various parts of the stage.

German Expressionism is a genre that also usually needs elbowroom. Huge settings and notoriously shadowy lighting effects are supposed to dwarf the human figure. Short of using puppets, how do you achieve that result in a small theatre like the Cottesloe? *Machine Wreckers* had good sets and costumes by Vicki Mortimer, superb atmospheric lighting by Tina MacHugh, and wonderfully haunting music by Helen Chadwick (note that all were women), but the ending, where the giant machine that the workers are attacking comes to life, was a disappointment.

Toller's play deals with the Luddite riots in northern England in the early nineteenth century. Workers destroyed the textile machinery that was taking away their jobs, until Parliament actually made machine

[2] See my review in *The Hudson Review,* Volume XLV, No. 4 (Winter 1993), pp. 622–623.

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wrecking a capital crime. Toller's play, like other Expressionistic plays of the teens and twenties, is a reaction to World War I, in which machinery slaughtered millions. Even today, the ongoing industrial revolution continues to bring divided results, with unprecedented prosperity for the majority tied to unemployment and homelessness for a growing minority, while the possibilities of mechanical mass butchery seem unlimited.

Toller explores the ambiguities of the early machine age rather clumsily in *Machine Wreckers*; there is a three-way conflict, with the exploiting mill owners pitted not only against the machine wreckers, led by Ned Lud (based on the legendary figure who gave the Luddites their name), but also against a proto-communist, Jimmy Cobbett, the idealistic brother of a factory manager. The Luddites see only the horrific personal results of the new machinery; families are destroyed when the men lose their traditional jobs, while their wives and children, hired at starvation wages, work the machines, which require no skill to operate. Jimmy, on the other hand, sees machines as the source of ultimate prosperity, arguing that the workers should band together with other workers everywhere to take control of the factories themselves. How this might have succeeded in 1816, with an illiterate populace and rudimentary communication, is kept vague, so that it comes as no surprise when the workers ignore Jimmy and ultimately murder him (when they learn that his brother is a manager, they are naturally suspicious), continuing their futile attacks on the new factories.

Mitchell's sure directorial hand blended imagination and craft. She added weird juxtapositions that were appropriate to the nightmarish Expressionist style, such as a twentieth-century bureaucrat in a Homburg reading out the law to the workers, or a black-robed death figure silently pacing upstage, carrying a scythe. Workers were dressed in rough, early nineteenth-century clothing, while the owners and managers looked like archetypal robber barons in suits and stiff-collar shirts dating from a hundred years later. Mitchell liberally used unorthodox casting for shock effect (unlike *Richard II*, where it was used neutrally); a man played a female prostitute in a dress and wig, for example, with no attempt at a woman's voice, while starving children were played by obvious adults. She handled groups masterfully, while moving the action forward with drive and flow. Her actors all spoke Toller's clunky dialogue, as translated by Ashley Dukes, with great sincerity; I especially liked Colin Tierney as Jimmy, whose simple honesty prevented the portentous lines from causing audience giggles. ("Oh brothers, if the working folk of England are faithless to their calling, . . . then you are slaves until the end of time!")

For the machine wrecking scene, Mitchell came up with all kinds of resourceful effects, including strobe lights, sounds of factory whistles and machinery, and jets of live steam. The big ominous machine itself had to be placed obscurely offstage, however, behind the audience. This was at best adequate. Actors peered out at it, and certainly seemed

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frightened, but it was a fright we could little share. Since visual power is really the only effective element in Toller's weakly scripted play, Mitchell should have been given one of the big stages at National, and an equally big budget. Is there a conspiracy to keep women directors off the main stages at the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre?

British author Rodney Ackland (1908–91) wrote plays from the thirties through the fifties that had *succès d'estime* and then dropped from sight. His *Absolute Hell*, savaged by the critics when it appeared in 1951, may not quite be the forgotten masterpiece that its current advocates believe it to be, but the play is certainly disturbing and unusual, especially for its time.

In the postwar period, the English theatre was inferior to our own. The Actors Studio, before "The Method" hardened into ideology, gave our actors an honesty and rough energy that few British actors could match. Broadway was still vital, producing Williams and Miller and the late plays of O'Neill at a time when the London stage was dominated by the ever-so-polite Christopher Frye and Terence Rattigan. The year 1956 is regarded as the turning point, when the production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* reawakened the British to the possibilities of the theatre as an art form. A new generation of writers and actors brought working-class intensity and outrage to the stage, while rediscovering its long-standing artistic and literary traditions. In 1968, the repeal of the 230-year-old Licensing Act ended censorship, expanding the possibilities of playwrights even further. Meanwhile, American theatre declined into the doldrums that still hold us back.

If Ackland had been born twenty or thirty years later than he was, he might now be on the list of standard modern British playwrights. If *Absolute Hell* had been written after 1956, it would have seemed less unusual, though no less shocking, since shock *became* usual with playwrights like Pinter, Bond, and Orton. In fact, the play was *re*written for production in the eighties, adding blunt language and explicit references to homosexuality that would both have been impossible in 1951. At the same time, the name was changed from the original *The Pink Room.*

Absolute Hell takes place in the summer of 1945, between the Allied victory in Europe and the defeat of Japan. The setting is the pink sitting room of an after-hours club called "La Vie en Rose" in Soho, London. Such establishments appeared because of the arcane laws regulating alcohol consumption in Great Britain, which severely limited the hours that pubs could operate, but left a loophole for private clubs. The upper classes were not about to restrict their own boozing in the long-established gentlemen's clubs, even while piously supporting laws to protect the working classes from the evils of drink. But of course, anybody could start a club, serving alcohol at all hours to members and their guests. "La Vie en Rose" serves an amazingly broad cross section of society, rich and poor, young and old, dissolute and respectable.

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Money or social standing is irrelevant; membership is instead controlled by an imperious middle-aged proprietress named Christine.

The large cast of vivid individuals includes British soldiers and American GIs; a manipulative film producer and his male lover/assistant; a lesbian, monocled, cigar-smoking literary critic and *her* lover, a cheery WREN officer; an heiress to a fortune her family made in treacle; an impoverished, forgetful elderly woman living on the dole; and many other oddballs who wander in and out. A religious fanatic likes to enter through the window from time to time, handing out leaflets; the cornerstone of her theology is that Jesus Christ was born on Boxing Day. The hero of the play, if one can call him that, is Hugh Marriner, a sensitive homosexual writer down on his luck, desperately trying to borrow money or sell one of his stories to the films. His long-term lover, Nigel, is breaking up with him to marry a woman, a decidedly unpromising match, but brought on as much by Hugh's drinking and writer's block as by Nigel's desire for respectability.

Ackland clearly sees this collection of disparate characters as a synecdoche for England as a whole, which is probably why the original critics found the play so irritating. Brought together by the war, these highly individualized eccentrics (typically English in that regard, if in no other) are already breaking up, taking refuge in drink and casual sex. The building the club inhabits, damaged by the war, is literally falling down. Escapism is a constant theme; no one seems able to deal with anything serious or to accomplish anything. Mention of the war, the recently-discovered Nazi death camps, or the loss of friends and companions, crops up only occasionally, leading to a quick change of subject. A major election is going on in the country, the one that brought the Labour Party to power, with its strong social agenda; but, even though the Party has offices across the street from the club, and most of the club members are left-leaning, they do not even bother to vote. The play ends pretty much where it began, except that the club is closed, and life is drifting on. The sole positive note is that Hugh and his lover, whose marriage ended almost instantaneously, may reunite.

The program for the production at the Lyttelton Theatre in the National Theatre complex, as well as the introduction to the recent printed version of the play, makes much of the Chekhovian influence. Ackland himself said that Komisarjevsky's English production of *The Three Sisters* in 1925 came to him as a revelation. Certainly Ackland's multiple characters, each with his or her own plot line, the sense of atmosphere, and the feeling of general decline, are all typical of Chekhov's great plays. But as an American, remembering the predominance of American drama at the time *Absolute Hell* was originally written, I was more impressed by the similarities to some Broadway plays of the thirties and forties: Kaufman and Hart's *You Can't Take It with You*, Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*, and especially, O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*. All have a large cast of eccentrics, and an escapist theme; the last two take place in drinking establishments. Ackland sees England as

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becoming Americanized, an ambivalent process. The American characters in the play are all louts, while its American dramatic style, while exuberant, is also formless and aimless.

Anthony Page adroitly directed the National Theatre production, which had a fascinating pink setting, slightly askew, designed by John Gunter. Dame Judi Dench led the fine cast with a superb performance as Christine, strong, domineering, yet with a terrible loneliness underneath. Greg Hicks as Hugh was equally good, nervous and fearful, yet with underlying intelligence, wit, and humanity that gave him strength. I had not seen Hicks, who successfully played many roles at the National and RSC back in the eighties, for several years. It was good to see him back where he belongs.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

American Treasures: Whistler, Stettheimer, Scully

THE SUMMER OF 1995 PROVIDED ONE OF THE BEST opportunities in recent memory to reflect on, and relish, the varied nature of American painting from the 1860s to the 1990s. In May, the James McNeill Whistler retrospective and the Arshile Gorky show opened at the National Gallery of Art. Then came the Edward Hopper exhibition at the Whitney (a mob scene on any day of the week right up to its close in October), followed in quick succession by the Florine Stettheimer revival at the same museum and the traveling show of Sean Scully's monumental abstractions. Never has the notion of American art lagging behind European creativity seemed more quaint.

Of course, Whistler is a problem in some ways. He was not a master draftsman at a time when that counted. Hands and arms don't always seem plausibly attached; cheekbones have a way of looking as if they would dissolve at the touch. His rocks on the beach are cardboard. The famed intentional darkness of the nocturnes and even the portraits can be mightily oppressive when seen in bulk, and his innovations are slight when we remember that these paintings were made in the time of Cézanne, Munch, and Monet at Giverny. But Whistler always demanded to be taken on his own terms, and the Washington show (minus the great works at the Frick, which don't travel) spotlighted enough of his accomplishments to reaffirm the artist's key place in our cultural history—though not necessarily in the purely formalist context he espoused. A lot of these paintings are interesting less for their grand atmospherics than for the tensions they imply between a man whose real-life plate was incredibly full and an aesthete who saw evocation and subtlety as his true calling.

The gentle views of Valparaiso and the sunsets at Trouville, for instance, have their appeal, and no one wants to repeat Ruskin's mistake of sounding like a dodo and missing the greatness of *The Falling Rocket* (1875). This is no mere "pot of paint flung in the public's face." But even more gripping, to an American of this fin de siècle, is Whistler's poking away at the bubble of Victorian pretension, or our pretension, that anything matters beyond sensibility. The Glasgow Museum's portrait of the seventy-eight-year-old Carlyle validates the sitter's complaint that Whistler seemed to be spending as much time on his coat as his face. Posed in exactly the same fashion as the artist's mother in her

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mourning dress, the preeminent philosopher of the age is faithfully rendered as a man near the end of his days, but what's pointedly omitted is any trace of his achievements or the reverence with which he had been held by the public. (Small wonder Benjamin Disraeli passed on Whistler's offer to "do" him.) George Vanderbilt's money counts for little as he becomes an excuse for a deftly managed exercise in the "scumbling" and blending of gray and black. The art critic Theodore Duret appears to be vainly trying to hold on to what dignity and individuality he can in the face of Whistler's attempt to outdo—or redo—Manet's more heartfelt portrait of him. This is Aestheticism as a kind of robust revenge on the world. The dazzler of mid-nineteenth-century American art, the National Gallery's own *Wapping* (1864), is really "about" the chaos of masts and rigging on the London waterfront—a chance for the artist to show us how brilliantly he can do ropes and sails, how well he can mix browns, blacks, and whites—with the three human beings of the painting nudged off to the side of the canvas, like so much excessive baggage. It is hard not to love an artist this feisty, arrogant, and curmudgeonly.

So the odd thing about Whistler in the context of the 1990s is how anomalous he has come to seem in relation to his times and ours. For years much was made of his titles (*Arrangement in Yellow and Gray, Symphony in White, Nocturne in Blue and Gold,* etc.) and his approach to art as musical, quasi-abstract, non-literary—as "pure" art divorced from the old-fashioned pictorial concern with a narrative or anecdotal focus. This was supposedly what made Whistler modern, what aligned him to our century even more than to the nineteenth. Yet it is quite impossible today to wander through galleries filled with sumptuous images of Thomas Carlyle and Theodore Duret, Frederick Leyland and Mary Cassatt's relations, the artist's seated mother and his dying wife, assorted Chelsea girls and London highbrows, and not be absorbed by the here-and-now of Whistler's world, a very specific and social domain that ironically transcended any and all attempts to "raise" it to the level of music. Just as it is impossible to be *more* taken with the somber glow of his pigment than with the peculiar attitudes of the man behind it. It is the two together that make Whistler worth knowing.

Another artist whose concerns could be said to be as much literary and philosophical as painterly is Florine Stettheimer, an American painter who died in 1944 at the age of seventy-three. That Stettheimer is so little known today is proof positive that time doesn't render just accounts in all cases: she isn't only one of the best women artists of American art—she is one of our best artists, period. The joys her paintings offer spring from diverse, self-confident sources: entertaining, unapologetically narrow subject matter (her upper-class family life and the New York avant-garde circa 1915–1930), unpredictable humor (part camp, part psychology), an unusual skill with the brush and palette knife, and a nutty, electrifying sense of color. Honored with a posthu-

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mous retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art during World War II, Stettheimer was, for those of us who came of age long after that era, merely a name associated with the more interesting memoirs of the Duchamp-Van Vechten-Virgil Thomson period. The 1980 exhibition of her work at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art (which traveled to Vassar in a much smaller version, if memory serves) was a revelation. I saw the show in Boston and Poughkeepsie that year and thought at the time that she was a quirky, formidable, seductive talent. In the 1980s the Metropolitan displayed its Stettheimers more regularly, but she continued to be a very obscure taste. The Whitney's attention to this important artist, then, was a significant development in 1995.

There are plausible reasons for Florine Stettheimer's neglect in the art-historical scheme of things. In a well-documented new biography, Barbara Bloemink writes: "Stettheimer had enough money to make art for her own pleasure; she painted to suit herself, not the vagaries of the art market. Because she had no economic incentive to join any codified circle of artists and gain visibility . . . she remains outside the history of modern art. Ironically, financial security severely *inhibited* the dissemination and knowledge of her work . . . [She] never actively marketed her work or associated with a single gallery . . . After her death, the artist's virtual anonymity was ensured when her paintings were relegated to museum basements, thereby keeping them permanently off the market."[1] Unlike Georgia O'Keeffe, Stettheimer had no interest in creating an aura for herself or her pictures. Unlike the men of the Stieglitz circle, she had no use for a high-powered advocate. And, most importantly, unlike the social realists and the new abstractionists, she was indifferent to contemporary issues and changing tastes. She was creator *and* audience for her art, and left posterity to fend for itself. In the age of Pollock and Warhol, she was entirely forgotten.

The figure of the serious gentleman-painter is a rare one in American culture (and even less common is the female equivalent, whatever that would be called). The output of such a privileged individual tends to be aesthetically conservative, an exercise in connoisseurship and craft rather than anything more daring. Not so with Florine Stettheimer. She and her sisters Carrie and Ettie may have been born into a world that expected little from them—they were Manhattan contemporaries of Edith Wharton—but they made the most of their freedom from want by surrounding themselves with the intellectual elite of their time. With the exception of her involvement in the Modernist opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* in 1934, she lived a private if stimulating life.

In the earlier paintings in the Whitney show, which came with the wonderful title "Manhattan Fantastica," Stettheimer looked promising for her beyond-Fauve colors but not for her anatomical drawing. (Big lumps, those women in the 1915 family portrait.) But there was no need

[1] Barbara Bloemink, THE LIFE AND ART OF FLORINE STETTHEIMER. Yale University Press, p. xi. $40.00.

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to worry on that score, and by the time of the picnic/soiree paintings of 1917–1919, figures have been elongated to the point of weightlessness and facial expressions tell the story. Mood, setting, good company, and wry interactions are all-important. Stettheimer's purples, hot pinks, blaring reds, school-bus yellows, and lurid pastels send us reeling, while compositions have become breathlessly complex, and madcap frames forcibly contain a spectacle that is simultaneously theatrical and intimate. Hanging out with Duchamp & Co. was probably never this much fun—nothing could be. "Manhattan Fantastica" celebrates a state of mind as much as it documents a social reality.

In her seamless blending of style and content, Stettheimer proved herself to be more than a little insightful and mischievous, supplying in abundance the one quality American art is most deficient in—amiable wit. The portraits are fascinating visual constructions and devastating character sketches. Carl Van Vechten has never looked more fey and impish or Joseph Hergesheimer more rococo or Alfred Stieglitz more cunning. Even the dearest friends, like the art critic Henry McBride, could be complimented and sassed at the same time. In his 1922 portrait, he sits perched above the hectic scene beneath him like a prissy judge at a tennis match, with palm trees out of Homer and towers out of Demuth behind him. (Allusions to her friends' favorite artists or possessions was a cherished Stettheimer device.) In the 1919 *Cathedrals of Art,* set in the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum, McBride waves STOP and GO signs like a traffic cop before those who crave entry to the pantheon; cocky and droll is this guardian of the temple. Almost the only people spared Stettheimer's loving satire were the older women of her household—her mother, her aunt, and her ex-teacher, all of whom (in separate pictures) are shown in their floor-length black dresses of the 1880s. Stettheimer was heeding Pound's cry of "make it new" in her own way, but with an understated reverence for the people and customs that had gone before.

If one mark of a great painter is that each section of his or her canvas is utilized to maximum effect, Stettheimer qualifies in this regard too. Every inch of every painting bespeaks excitement with the medium and its possibilities. You could, in fact, detach small sections of many and have a collection of esoteric little gems. The mulatto woman being wheeled about in her canopied carriage in the bottom right corner of *Asbury Park South* (1920), the diners amid the potted palms in the top edge of the 1920 portrait of her aunt, any one of the ladies-gone-wild in *Spring Sale at Bendel's* (1921), the snow-covered statue of Shakespeare in *Christmas* (n.d.), and—best of all—the flowers and books at the far left of the 1929 portrait of her elderly teacher: all of these rich "incidentals" are as engrossing as the central image. By the time Stettheimer painted her three later "Cathedral" works (1931–1941), turning from her own small circle to the gaudy pageant of Broadway, Wall Street, and Fifth Avenue, the world had long since changed, the Jazz Age having given

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way to the darkness of the Depression. But for Stettheimer, the fantastic and the lighthearted were permanent qualities of mind.

The exhibition at the Whitney was a very popular one (though not as jampacked as the Hopper), and it is surprising and disappointing that it didn't travel to other cities. But with Ms. Bloemink's solid biography and this fine show (one of the best I've seen at this museum), it is to be hoped that Florine Stettheimer won't entirely slip away from us again, back into the shadows of the Cathedral of Art, but will take her place in the textbooks and on the museum walls and in our collective sense of what makes American art from Thomas Eakins to Nancy Graves the distinctive and idiosyncratic thing that it is. The British writer Adam Mars-Jones once described an Edmund White novel as a cake that had been frosted but not baked. Florine Stettheimer's paintings are cakes that have been baked and frosted twice over. But for all the sugar and the decorative toppings, they have their own kind of body. She was sweet, but she was sly, and there is a point at which cleverness and one-of-a-kind technique can actually become profound and enduring.

The exhibition of Sean Scully's paintings that originated at the Hirshhorn in Washington, D.C. last summer before traveling to Atlanta's High Museum and to venues in Barcelona, Dublin, and Frankfurt was a great rarity in the cultural landscape of the mid-1990s. This was a show that suggested—proved, I would maintain—an idea that seems to most of us "counter-intuitive," as the sociologists say. Namely, that abstract art still lives and breathes as a meaningful concept and as a potentially dynamic physical reality. Most of what we have seen in the last ten years or more which passes for abstraction is so anemic, so trite, so brittle, so pointless and defeating, that the only reasonable conclusion has been that the path forged by Dove, Maievich, Kandinsky, and Mondrian has long since come to an end. From Mark Rothko and Franz Kline to Peter Halley and Philip Taaffe is a pretty startling decline. But Sean Scully is one of a small number of painters who have painstakingly created a large body of work—and what is just as important (no room for liberal-arts idealism here), a career and a curatorial following—that stands in opposition to this fear. He makes you believe that non-representational painting still has a place, still has the muscle and soul to make a difference.

A native of Dublin who became a U.S. citizen in 1978, Scully combines a European sense of aesthetic tradition with an American feel for tough physicality, invention, and construction. Though his roots in the early seventies were in Minimalism and Op Art, he didn't persist in that arid vein for long. The man who had always responded to Van Gogh, Matisse, and Rothko wasn't inclined to follow a path that ultimately negated empathy, metaphor, or the idea of art as a fundamentally sensual and spiritual form of expression. Yet neither is Scully of a nostalgic temperament; for him, the painting of representational imagery reached its end-point by the middle of the twentieth century (with Matisse as

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orchestrator of the grand finale). Those qualities of empathy, metaphor, and sensuality had to be expressed abstractly.

Over the years Scully's body of work has been called regressive because of his use of stripes or bands of paint. Mondrian, Frank Stella, Bridget Riley: the grid effect has been done, his critics claimed. This approach has always seemed to me akin to the suggestion that Bonnard and Monet had no business painting fruit and tabletops because Chardin got there first. The point is that Scully's large, grainy canvases—the oil applied thickly and unevenly with a housepainter's brush—look like no one else's and say something completely their own. To be sure, this is the tricky issue. What does it mean to believe that a painting without identifiable forms "says" something, refers to a reality beyond itself and the room it is in? Why does a Frank Stella stripe-painting proclaim, "Look at me and don't think of anything else," while a Scully is both abstract and *extra*-pictorial? Perhaps this brings us round again to Whistler and the old music analogy. Some music does not lead us back to the world-at-large, tells us to luxuriate in the sounds themselves. But other music, just as good, evokes personal or emotional associations and offers an overlap of life and art.

There is even a sense of Scully's reaching out to us in the very three-dimensionality of the painting. Diptychs, triptychs, polyptychs—sections of canvas are attached to others that jut forward several inches (or more), while panels, or "windows," are sometimes wedged into the center of a canvas. With Scully, we aren't in the rarefied terrain of an Ad Reinhardt or a Donald Judd, where purity and sleekness and unsweaty, even haughty "perfection" are the goals. We see the underpainting, the confused choices, the evidence of the hand at work. His messy bands—avenues? columns?—of paint quiver or reverberate, just as his windows and attachments declare the beauty and naturalness of the tactile, the makeshift, the aggressively fragmented. The titles provide clues, on occasion. *Heart of Darkness* (1982), with three areas of radically different color and size, obviously makes us think of Conrad's story of dislocation and entrapment. *Narcissus* (1984) evokes seductive pools of water, the treachery of ego. *No-Neo* (1984) takes a stand against rip-off revivals in art. But the literary dimension is hardly necessary. These are paintings about perception in the deepest sense, in the same way that a late Mondrian is about more than the urban grid of New York City and an early Kandinsky is about more than Russian folklore. They teach us to think in terms of paint rather than theory. These are works of energy and light that allow for reactions as varied as civilized calm (e.g., MoMA's 1988 *A Bedroom in Venice*) and sexy delight (*The Bather* of 1983). They are—most uncommon of entities today—paintings of labor, growth, and conviction.

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SUSAN BALÉE

Two-Part Harmony

ROBERT BROWNING, DURING THE PERIOD OF HIS MARRIAGE to Elizabeth Barrett, endured the reputation of a failed poet. The great promise shown in his first published collection, *Paracelsus* (1835), had been dashed by the hostile reception of his second (*Sordello*, 1840). His reputation did not begin to revive until the 1860s, after the publication of *Men and Women*, and after the death of his beloved wife. In the 1870s, surrounded by a group of fawning undergraduates, Browning was asked, "Do you object to all this adulation?" The poet's answer was swift: "Object to it! No; I have waited forty years for it, and now—I like it." He would like it even more today—he seems to have risen even above Tennyson as this century's favorite Victorian poet. Robert Browning regularly makes the syllabus of nineteenth-century literature courses and a phalanx of literary critics have devoted their careers to him, spinning out articles and books that examine everything from his verse style (prosy), to his philosophical and religious ideas (Christian) and his marriage (happy).

His wife's reputation has not fared half so well. Instead, Elizabeth Barrett Browning has shrunk to the stature of a trivia question on "Jeopardy"—the answer to "Who wrote the poem beginning with this famous line: 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways—'?" (Most people can't remember the rest of the sonnet, either.) But Julia Markus, in her new biography of the marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning,[1] gives the poetess the admiration she merits in our time by accurately setting her in the context of her own.

The context of Elizabeth Barrett's time—from her first meeting with Robert in 1845 until her death in 1861—includes the prelude to the American Civil War (both poets were abolitionists, both possibly had African blood); the Italian Unification movement (she is still considered the poet laureate of the Risorgimento, and the heart of the mid-Victorian Anglo-Florentine community); the heyday of Florence Nightingale, George Sand (whom Barrett Browning idolized), Louis Napoléon, Cavour and Garibaldi, the spiritualist D.D. Home.

In this slab of the nineteenth century, mothers and children were revered as saints and angels; mothers died frequently in childbirth, children died frequently of fevers; morphine was legal, relatively inex-

[1] DARED AND DONE: The Marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, by *Julia Markus*. Alfred A. Knopf. $30.00.

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pensive, and widely consumed; poetry was still a much-read literary form and rhymed; Christianity was in crisis, séances were popular, and Darwin was on the ascent. Money made on the backs of West Indian slaves still infused the bank accounts of many of England's "best families"; a man's honor was his life, and he could defend it with a duel; women could be jailed for dressing up as men, but boys were dressed as girls until advanced toddlerhood, sometimes longer—as in the case of Barrett Browning's son, Pen.

The Victorians loved chivalry. From the 1830s on, they had been enchanted by the spirit of the Middle Ages. The leaders of the Oxford Movement studied the rituals of the early church; artists and poets, inspired by a new translation of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, set themselves to reinventing the legends of King Arthur. Tennyson versified the adventures of the knights of the Round Table and the Pre-Raphaelites painted them. Beneath his waistcoat, a well-bred Victorian man wore an invisible silver breastplate (on shameful occasions, this might be traded for a hair shirt). Such men tried to live up to the chivalric code, and, when the need arose, they fancied themselves knights in shining armor who fought dragons and rescued damsels in distress. Robert Browning performed one of the most celebrated Victorian rescues when he saved Elizabeth Barrett from her invalid's room in her father's house. He stole the princess from the jealous dragon, her father, and she immortalized their love in *Sonnets from the Portuguese.*

Nineteenth-century England possesses no more compelling love story than this one. Elevated into art by the *Sonnets*, it is also a true story, amply documented by the poets' two volumes of *billets-doux.* Many readers of these published letters have come under the spell of the Barrett-Browning courtship and marriage and Julia Markus is no exception. One senses from page one that she worships Elizabeth Barrett. Except for the poet's misguided belief in spirit rapping, Markus identifies with Barrett on every point, particularly the most important one: her adoration of Robert Browning. Here is one of the biographer's early comments on the suitor and the suited:

> This was an extraordinary woman in her time, and her times knew it. The inner strength, the remarkable scope of mind, the deep understanding of human nature, all of this was part of the love letters. It was Elizabeth who had to search for answers. Robert Browning knew what he wanted. He wanted Elizabeth Barrett. He wanted her at the beginning of the correspondence. He never wavered. He wanted her at the end.

This is the rhetoric of romance novels, but it works. It works because Julia Markus recognizes the transcendent quality of the love shining through those hundreds of letters, the love that lasted beyond courtship and through fifteen years of marriage, Elizabeth's ill health, Robert's writer's block, and the birth and rearing of their son. As Markus informs

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us: "The sophisticated cynics who debunk the love between Robert and Elizabeth do it at the expense of two facts: the poets' words and their lifelong actions."

In the next three hundred or so pages, Markus will give us plenty of the poets' words and actions. They do indeed corroborate a happy marriage, but one that naturally lost the romantic intensity of the secret courtship. Their love changed from early idealization and infatuation to a comfortable, companionate union. A strong marriage, definitely, but by its very nature not a particularly interesting one. Luckily, however, Markus has the backdrop of momentous world events—such as Italy's struggle for unity—to set the poets' rather staid lives against. She has also done the meticulous work of a definitive biographer and studied every source, published and unpublished, that she could find. The book is therefore thickly documented with excerpts from letters and with visual aids: paintings, sketches, and photographs. Best of all, as a fine novelist herself (*Uncle* won the Houghton Mifflin Literary Award), Markus has the ability to render her scenes. She knows how to "show, not tell," and she keeps the narrative moving.

Dared and Done more than resuscitates Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning for late twentieth-century readers, it also provides an acute cultural critique of their mid-Victorian milieu. Their relationship, for instance, both supported and subverted the chivalric myth of the strong and knightly male who rescues the weak damsel in distress. Several ironies in their relationship soon become evident: Robert rescued Elizabeth from spinsterhood and her father's tyranny, but they lived on her money[2] after their marriage (as a poet by trade and inclination, he had none). Although Elizabeth sincerely wanted to promote her husband's poetry, the public in their day vastly preferred her work to his. Robert became the "obscure" poet, Elizabeth the celebrated one.

The final irony, in this antebellum period, is that Elizabeth's income was derived from slave labor in Jamaica. Her family, the Barretts of Cinnamon Hill, owned vast plantations around Montego Bay. Much of the money they made from the sweat of slaves, they funnelled back to their relatives in England. Elizabeth Barrett's father, Edward Barrett Moulton Barrett, as the legitimate heir of the Jamaican branch of the family, derived the bulk of his income from the West Indies operations.

Robert Browning also had a Jamaican connection. His father's family had also settled there in an earlier generation and they, too, had amassed healthy fortunes with the aid of slave labor. The difference between Browning's father and Barrett's is that Robert Browning, Sr., renounced his Jamaican inheritance after he visited the island and saw the injustices of slavery. Instead, he became a bank clerk back in England and his son grew up in a middle-class family rather than a

[2] Although Elizabeth Barrett's father disinherited her when she secretly married Robert Browning, she had her own income. Her Uncle Samuel and her Grandmother Elizabeth Barrett had each left her £4,000 from their Jamaican fortunes.

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wealthy one. However, Browning Sr., enjoyed sketching, writing, and a clear conscience, and his son never experienced the tyranny of a patriarch.

Elizabeth's father was, of course, another story. The best part of this biography, in my opinion, is the excavation of Edward Barrett Moulton Barrett's[3] childhood, his genetic legacy as well as his material inheritance, and the effect of his Jamaican upbringing on his relationship with his children. Markus probes beneath the dragon's skin and reveals a compelling explanation for Papa Barrett's cruel "system" in regard to his children's future. Barrett's "system"—as Elizabeth always referred to it in her correspondence—was simply this: he forbade his children *ever* to marry. To do so, he made clear, would be grounds for complete disinheritance. Unfortunately for Moulton Barrett, the taboo on romantic relationships did not make them disappear, it only made them clandestine, and all the more intense for being hidden.

Beginning with Elizabeth, his eldest and most beloved daughter, several of the Barrett children did eventually marry and leave the family. As he had threatened, Moulton Barrett disinherited them and all their progeny and never spoke to them again. Nevertheless, his system had failed. By imposing the taboo on marriage, he repeated the very pattern that Markus argues he had been hoping to avoid—his children produced offspring and the Moulton Barrett genes continued into future generations.

Markus' revelation about Edward Barrett Moulton Barrett is this: He wanted to extinguish his own line because it had been tainted by the blood of slaves. According to Markus, he was ashamed of his own genetic legacy. Julia Markus is not the first biographer to discuss the influence of African blood on the behavior of both the Barrett and the Browning patriarchs, but she is certainly the first to make it the centerpiece of her book. Before her, however, Frederick Furnivall, the founder of the Browning Society, asserted that Browning almost certainly had "a touch of the tar brush" (to use the Edwardian term). A well-respected 1938 book about the Barrett ancestry, Jeannette Marks's *The Family of the Barretts: A Colonial Romance*, validated Furnivall's speculation after a thorough investigation of all of the Jamaica and St. Kitts documents pertaining to both the Browning and the Barrett families.

As meticulous a researcher as the current biographer, Jeannette Marks nevertheless had a completely different agenda: instead of feeling a multicultural rejoicing in the mixed-blood children of the West Indies, the 1938 researcher was disconcerted by much of what she uncovered. Many of the white plantation owners, she learned, had African mistresses (and, Julia Markus annotates, preferred them to their English wives). A significant population of mulatto children derived from these unions, and the white fathers did what they could to help their

[3] As Maisie Ward humorously noted in *Robert Browning and His World*, "only in England could such names be borne, in both senses of the word. . . ."

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illegitimate offspring. One such father, Elizabeth Barrett's Uncle George Goodin Barrett, manumitted both his mistress and his illegitimate issue before his death. He also "provided for his children's education in England and stipulated that after that education he hoped they would not return to Jamaica but settle in a country where racism would not hinder their development." A number of them settled in France.

Elizabeth's father was the son of Elizabeth Barrett (generations of her family bore the same names) and Charles Moulton. Moulton departed the marriage after seven years and the birth of three children and was last heard of as a slave merchant in New York. Edward never knew his father, and his grandfather decreed that his mother and siblings add another "Barrett" to their last names. Hence the beginning of the Moulton Barrett line. Edward, at age seven, was separated from the mother he loved and shipped to England for a "proper" education. He was sent to Harrow and forced, as all the new boys were, to be the fag (read "slave") of an older boy who beat him when he didn't perform his tasks satisfactorily. Traumatized, Edward soon withdrew. By this time, his mother had relocated to England and Edward received the rest of his education at home.

At the age of nineteen, he married Mary Graham-Clarke, the eldest daughter in a family he had known all his life. Together they produced eleven children who lived to adulthood. After his wife's death in 1828 (Elizabeth, their eldest daughter, was then twenty-one), Moulton Barrett became a single parent and a singularly stern one. Julia Markus, to explain why he suddenly forbade his children ever to marry, conjectures, "Moulton Barrett might very well have either learned after his children were born or become increasingly concerned with the possibility that he had mixed blood."

Although the earlier biographer, Jeannette Marks, concluded that Robert Browning probably had African blood on his father's side, she could not document that Elizabeth Barrett's line had been mixed. Markus brings the point home, however, by quoting one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's love letters to Robert. Elizabeth explains that her surname is not Barrett but "Moulton Barrett" and though she'd like to forget the Moulton, she cannot. "Nevertheless, I would give ten towns in Norfolk (if I had them) to own some purer lineage than that of the blood of the slave!—Cursed we are from generation to generation!"

Elizabeth, asserts Markus, believed that her grandfather Moulton had mixed blood, a story that she may have heard from her grandmother's companion and mulatto cousin, Treppy. (After the grandmother's death, Treppy lived with Moulton Barrett's family until her own demise in 1857.) It is certainly true that all contemporary accounts of the poet describe her as dark complexioned. She even described herself as "little and black."

The issue of ancestry became a painful subject soon after the death of Elizabeth's mother. At this time, still suffering from the blow of his wife's death, Moulton Barrett lost a great deal of money. His grandfather's will

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had been contested by some of his mixed blood, illegitimate cousins, who ultimately won the suit. This was a few years before the 1833 abolition of slavery in Jamaica, and "how much more alienated he must have felt as he declined not only in wealth but in prestige as the majority of British people came to despise slavery and blame it on the Creole planters."

Markus asserts that he came to see himself and his line as cursed, and that "racist fears based on family secrets would certainly explain why the news of grandchildren did nothing to mollify his extreme position." Elizabeth Barrett sent him many letters about his grandson, Pen, but Moulton Barrett never answered them, never had any relationship whatever with any of his excommunicated children or their offspring. This grieved Elizabeth for the rest of her life. Before she fell in love with Robert, she had been her father's most devoted child—a fact she underscored in letter after unanswered letter to him until his death. It didn't matter. He never forgave her.

After their marriage, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning settled in Italy. The climate was more favorable to her health—Elizabeth suffered from chronic lung ailments—and the country was a wonderful place for Brits on a budget to live cheaply. After a brief sojourn in Pisa, the two poets moved to Florence, where they immediately fell in love with the city and its people. They became Tuscan patriots, and Elizabeth wrote much of her best poetry from their apartment in Casa Guidi, a building across the way from the Pitti Palace. As exemplified by *Casa Guidi Windows*, Barrett Browning wrote a number of political poems during her years in Italy. She added her poetic voice to Italy's cries as it labored to give birth to a nation. Unfortunately, the very topicality of her Risorgimento poems prevents them from being widely read today. Markus tries, by giving huge chunks of historical background on the warring factions in 1840s Italy, to make the poems accessible to modern readers, but they still seem disconnected from our experiences. Immortal poems bring out what is universal in their subjects, but the unification of Italy remains an item of interest primarily to Italians and historians.

But if Markus can't save some of these poems from oblivion, at least she can save the poet. She puts Dana Gioia's question to the corpus of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "Can poetry matter?" Barrett Browning's answer has to be *yes*, with emphasis. "To her, poetry was a form of action. Like Shelley, she saw the poet as the unacknowledged legislator of [hu]mankind." Like post-modern literary critics, Barrett Browning thought she could change a nation's politics with her words. To a certain extent, she succeeded.[4] After all, not only could she write beautifully, but she could write for the masses:

[4] It probably goes without saying that contemporary literary critics, whose words are aimed at the academic elite rather than the general public, have not enjoyed a similar success.

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Bitter things I write,
Because my soul is bitter for your sakes,
O freedom! O my Florence!

She cast in her lot with the Italians, and they never forgot her. Upon her death in 1861, the Florentines erected a tablet in her honor on the Casa Guidi. Her memory lives on in her adopted land, and her son moved there permanently after his marriage.

This one son, christened Robert Wiedeman Browning and self-named "Penini," occupies a goodly portion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's letters after his birth in 1849. She dressed the boy in velvet, embroidered lace, and feathers, and kept him in long finger curls—not unlike her own—until her death. (Soon thereafter, Robert had them cut and reoutfitted his son as a manly young Briton.) Elizabeth worshipped at the shrine of her golden boy, and many of her letters drip with cloying descriptions of his adorable activities and perennially baby voice. Julia Markus, who fell for Robert Browning because Ba (Elizabeth's pet name) loved him, falls equally hard for Pen. She swallows the mother's honied descriptions and forgets that it was a poet who wrote them. But it's clear to this reader that Ma Browning was fictionalizing her boy into a lisping little saint. At age six, long after children have left off baby-talk, she reports him saying things like "Dod bless you darling pet mama!" and "Tate tare of yourself." As my six-year-old would say, "Gag me!"

But, it's okay. Sentimentality saturated mid-century England. One has only to remember all of Dickens' breathy little orphans, from Oliver Twist to Little Nell, to see that Ba Browning was a mother of her times. She was also a practicing spiritualist with the first wave of true believers in the early 1850s. New biblical criticism from Germany had contested the divine authorship of the Bible and one aspect of the resulting crisis of religious faith was an unorthodox new interest in contacting the spirit world. The work of Emanuel Swedenborg became popular once again, and Barrett joined with Blake before her in a Swedenborgian view of the afterlife. As Markus points out, her ill health had worsened by this point and she hungered to believe that she would live on after death and be reunited with Browning, as Swedenborg had described in *Conjugal Love.*

Robert Browning, a robust man in his forties, did not share his wife's vested interest in life after death. They attended séances with the famous nineteenth-century medium, D.D. Home, and while Elizabeth believed everything she saw, Robert remained deeply skeptical. Home barred him from attendance after the second séance, which persuaded Browning that the medium was a fraud. Harry Houdini concluded the same thing over fifty years later. His own inability to contact his dead mother convinced Houdini that Home had been a master magician, like himself, but that he could not summon departed spirits.

The backdrop of the mid-century fascination with spirit contact is intriguing, but the biography starts to drag when Markus begins quoting from a long and repetitive series of letters that Elizabeth wrote to Sophia

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Eckley, a rich young American who also styled herself a medium. Elizabeth was taken in by Sophie, despite her husband's better judgment. She later realized that her friend was a fraud, and told her so. This is interesting, but it doesn't warrant the nearly fifty pages that Markus devotes to it. She does so apparently because, as her acknowledgments reveal, she had access to this huge sheaf of letters and wanted to use them.

A better source is the one that turned up at the last minute: 115 letters from Elizabeth Barrett to her sister Arabel, in the possession of a living scion of the Moulton Barrett family. Captain Gordon E. Moulton-Barrett permitted Markus to read and quote from this extensive source, providing scholars with much new material to ponder. Elizabeth could confide aspects of her life and marriage to her sister that she left out of the correspondence to her friends. These letters also reveal Arabel as a fully-realized character in the Barrett family drama. The sister who never married, she gave her life to her father and to charities. After her father's death, she adopted a cousin's child—but later gave her back. She wanted to be a mother, but without the bother of a husband, and only with a particularly grateful child. Arabel Barrett, it seems to me, is worthy of her own book, either a biography or a fictionalized tale of the Barrett family from her point of view—a Barrett variant of *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Perhaps Markus, the novelist, will be the one to attempt it.

Overall, this is an excellent biography. The main characters are so well rendered with their own words that they almost seem alive again, and the large cast of minor characters—from the Anglo-Florentine circle at mid-century to Barrett Browning's maid Wilson—also make memorable appearances. Although she offers no earth-shattering new insights into either Barrett's or Browning's poems, the discussions of art and artists (Robert Browning, during a writer's block of several years, turned to sculpting and figure drawing) nicely complement Markus' comments about the poetry. Readers from a variety of backgrounds will find this a rewarding book and some are sure to be enchanted by the love story of Elizabeth and Robert. By the way, *how* did she love him?

> I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
> With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
> Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
> I shall but love thee better after death.

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JOHN HAINES

Poetry Chronicle

OF ANY BOOK OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY I would ask at least two questions: To whom is the poet speaking? Who is the audience here, actual or imagined? And secondly, what have I learned in reading this book? Has our common existence become broadened, deepened, and I somehow changed by this reading? I would ask this of any of the books under review here, as it must be asked sooner or later of any work, now and in time to come. My questions seem all the more justified in reference to several of the books I chose not to include in this review. For what I found often enough was more of what I find all too abundantly in poetry now: in fairly ordinary language, no subject beyond this uninspiring urban self with its minor distractions, combined with a school-bred tendency to force one's poem in order to appear to have something important to say. To point up the moral, imagine Keats or Wordsworth writing verses about the bad plumbing in his house, or how scratchy his underwear felt that morning! Did William stub his toe while walking the country roads? We don't know and we do not care. Instead, consider the inspired energy of these lines from "The Simplon Pass":

> . . . The immeasurable height
> Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
> The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
> And in the narrow rent, at every turn,
> Winds thwarting winds bewildered and forlorn . . .

Well, we know that Wordworth did not view that lofty pass through the lens of a television camera. He was there, on foot, with his early nineteenth-century passion for nature and social justice—a man in all of his youthful vigor and earthbound travail. And somehow that open, receptive disposition in circumstances that offered little comfort and convenience as we have come to understand them, seems to have been at the root of much of the poetry we cherish and call great. Why this should have been so would make for an interesting study.

From the two dozen books submitted to me for review, I have chosen, not entirely at random, a short list of seven that spoke to me in one way or another something about the condition of poetry now. The books are written in a variety of modes and voices, and I have included two books

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by poets writing outside America: one of them a veteran South American modernist, the other an Irish poet whose work was new to me.

Richard Tillinghast's *The Stone Cutter's Hand*[1] comes loaded with compliments from fellow poets like Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, and Louis Simpson: "a wonderfully gifted poet"; "distinctive, bold and satisfying . . ." Editorial remarks on the inside jacket echo these comments: "Richly imagined, superbly crafted . . . ," etc. The problem begins when we are asked to accept this kind of thing, become so commonplace now, to the point, and unfair to an honest writer, where it is difficult to take the praises seriously.

My own reaction to the poems has been mixed. While I admire the steady skill in versification, and respect the sensibility behind the poems, yet my overall impression is summed up in that word so often used to describe a certain competence: "academic." For example, there are a number of poems that derive from the poet's travel and temporary residence in Italy, Turkey, and Ireland, while periodically reverting to some domestic scene he has for the moment left behind. These poems have often a prosaic quality, as of a scholar on tour, recording various impressions clearly enough, but with little intensity of insight into what he sees and little direct participation in the lives of those who must live in that place.

Among the poems placed in Ireland, "The Ornament" is an interesting narrative concerning a troubled older woman known some years previously, and who has since died. Here are the first lines of the second stanza:

> Fine days, her troubled hair braided and pulled back
> Under a crow's-wing hat, she foraged for simples
> In the nearby fields or sat in her garden aimless
> As weather, watching the robins peck
> At breadcrumbs . . .

At a later time the poet returns for a visit:

> I called on the old soul just this Twelfth Night.
> She had died two winters back, and whatever
> History brought her to these rooms died with her.

If the portrait of the woman lacks completeness and depth, the story, as developed over a page and a half, is still affecting. The equal to Yeats in lyric skill and passion it is not, nor could it be, considering the poet's presence as a periodic visitor to place and people.

[1] THE STONE CUTTER'S HAND, by *Richard Tillinghast.* David R. Godine, Inc. $19.95.

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From "Xiphias," a poem about, in part, an early ill-fated love affair, I quote the fifth stanza:

> I wouldn't have cared if I had driven the Fiat
> Off the cliff, so long as we went over together.
> You were twenty-two then,
> *Signorina*, in the South of Italy,
> And I wished I had packed a gun.

At first I thought the poem ended with this stanza, and I was considering the impact of that last line, its sudden note of finality. Then, on turning the page, I found that the poem went on for another four stanzas, and for me the final effect was diminished. I found this muted intensity to be fairly common throughout the book.

The poems shift about a good deal geographically, from Manhattan to Belgrade, to Galway, Dublin, and elsewhere. Here and there are lines, as in a brief poem called "Twos," that are merely decorative, if not plain silly: "I leaf into a lane, thirsting for cloudburst. / You're wet, like a gardenia. / I speak bright plumage. / Your breeze blows in."

Otherwise, the poems are, as they are claimed to be, well-crafted, professional. It must be admitted, too, that Mr. Tillinghast's poems at times give the impression of a good deal more substance than is commonly found nowadays. Among the better poems are "Sighted in Belgrade," and "Pasha's Daughter, 1914." There are also translations from two Turkish poets. What the poems lack is something that would elevate them above mere professional accomplishment: an insight that would confirm all that they speak of so ably—some central and informing idea, that which finally controls the poetry and sets it in the one unavoidable direction. Few poets have it.

Charles Rafferty's *The Man on the Tower*[2] is an odd book, made up of short narratives in invented voices. It is a book that at first glance, and despite a fulsome endorsement by Stephen Dunn, I dismissed as another workshop study in originality. The poems are typically placed in the first person, with the poet assuming for the moment the character of various individuals. Titles to some of the poems may give an idea of the contents: "Story of the Man Who Has Nothing to Lose"; "The Man Whose Luck Is Changing"; "Story of the Escape Artist"; "The Silent Man Speaks." In the title poem, a man, apparently on a bet with others in a nearby pub, climbs a tower, and in spite of his own fear, of the police swarming below with bullhorns, he succeeds in gaining the top, and comes down again to the cheers of the pub crowd. Is it convincing? Not entirely. For one thing, we are not told what kind of tower it is or where

[2] THE MAN ON THE TOWER, by *Charles Rafferty*. The University of Arkansas Press. $14.00; $8.00.

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it is placed, and the context generally seems more than a little forced, leaving the reader asking questions.

Other poems are more convincing. Among the better is "Story of a Man Walking on the Tracks." Here are the first lines:

> He is walking the tracks, content
> to arrive where he must arrive,
> led by the steadiness of iron.

Here at least I have the sense of a man firmly placed in time, someone with a history, and who is actually walking somewhere on those tracks. Another poem, "Staying in Love," begins on a rather shocking note:

> There is a woman you love
> so you set her house on fire
> late one Saturday night

Characteristically, the poems will hint of a story behind the story being told, but we are not given anything further.

As interesting as the poems are in places, and with due credit for the inventiveness displayed throughout, I don't quite believe them. Which of the many voices is Rafferty's? Do we have the right to expect of a serious poet that he or she will present to us a convincing sensibility—a certain focus that tells us that here is someone who looks on life and experience in a certain way, with a voice and a vision that we can trust? Inevitably, while reading these poems I was reminded of Wallace Stevens' "The Man on the Dump," a completely realized poem originating in a sensibility brought to bear on the life of his time in such a way that every line and every poem carries the mark of that uniqueness.

Whatever doubts one may have concerning this book, Mr. Rafferty at any rate has a gift, and it will be interesting to see what he makes of it in the years to come.

When I first looked through Annie Dillard's *Mornings Like This*[3] and read her program notes, I was ready to set the book aside as a stunt and not worth serious attention. Subsequent reading has, to an extent, modified that impression. The book is subtitled *Found Poems.* The lines, as quoted throughout, are taken from various prose texts—from an eighth grade English text, from Van Gogh's Letters, a Boy Scout Handbook, etc.—and, according to Ms. Dillard, arranged in such a way as to simulate a poem originating with a single author. In her "Author's Note" she says of the poems, "Their sentences come from the books named. I lifted them. Sometimes I dropped extra words; I never added

[3] MORNINGS LIKE THIS: Found Poems, by *Annie Dillard.* HarperCollins Publishers. $20.00.

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a word." She is at least honest about her sources, in contrast to a recent perpetrator who has actually lifted whole poems from a contemporary poet, changed a word or two, and published them as his own (see Neal Bowers, "A Loss for Words, Plagiarism and Silence," *The American Scholar*, Fall 1994).

A few of her adaptations are especially effective. Among the best are those taken from the diary of a Russian naturalist, Mikhail Prishvin. Here are the last two stanzas of a poem constructed by Dillard from a walk in the woods as described by Prishvin, and to which she has given the title "Dash It":

> As for myself, I can only speak of what
> Made me marvel when I saw it for the first time.
> I remember my own youth when I was in love.
> I remember a puddle rippling, the insects aroused.
>
> I remember our own springtime when my lady told me:
> You have taken my best. And then I remember
> How many evenings I have waited, how much
> I have been through for this one evening on earth.

These lines are indeed poetic and moving, and might perhaps be even more so in their original context. There are others of a similar nature, such as the title poem, taken from *The Countryman's Year*, by David Grayson, and on the whole the collection has in places considerable interest. Nonetheless, what she has done here arouses some concern. What does work like this say about the legitimacy of authorship? Who in this instance is the author? Who can claim to be? I worry too about the example being set, and who might be influenced to attempt to repeat it. As it stands, it is mainly an interesting experiment; in the hands of someone less resourceful and intelligent than Ms. Dillard, little more than a trick to be dismissed.

Walter McDonald is a poet whose work until now I have not been familiar with, but his new book, *Counting Survivors*,[4] is of more than ordinary interest. The poems reveal, at their best, a life lived in the world of people and events, not made up in one's head to fit the occasion. The poems are about many things: his service in the Air Force in Vietnam, his war injuries, his children, his everyday life on the Texas plains. He calls up, memorably, a relative named Uncle Phillip, gassed in the trenches in World War I: "I remember the tilt of his cap / in pictures, a Texas doughboy in Paris / caught with some girl he never saw again." He takes his grandson hunting, and describes briefly the effect of that first kill:

[4] COUNTING SURVIVORS, by *Walter McDonald*. University of Pittsburgh Press. $24.95; $10.95.

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In his sleepingbag in the camper
all night he tried to forget
the one dove bleeding

with eyes like a kitten,
the throat rapidly beating,
the dark pearls.

If the poems do not in all ways justify the claims made for them on the dust jacket, they are at least honest and convincing. Nowadays that can be a great deal. Here are the last lines from "War in the Persian Gulf," a poem in which he speculates on the fate of a military classmate whom he has not seen for many years:

. . . Where is he now,
a general? Or sleepless in Baghdad,
worried about grandsons, still just a captain,
intractable, flying the slowest desk? Or shot down
years ago in Iran, bones in forgotten sands?
Or on alert in a French Mirage cockpit,
his handsome face lined, lips tight,
concealing his perfect teeth?

Allen Ginsberg, of course, needs no introduction, a popular poet if there ever was one, a name closely identified with postmodern poetry for the past four decades. His current collection, *Cosmopolitan Greetings: Poems 1986-1992*,[5] is merely a late entry to a long list of books. I myself have always held a certain skepticism regarding this poet, even while I cheerfully affirm my respect for a poem like "A Supermarket in California." Walt Whitman has seldom appeared more contemporary.

The opening poem in this volume, titled "Preface," is a typical repetitive rant, each set of lines introduced with "I write poetry because . . ." Here are some lines from the poem:

I write poetry because Millionaires East and West ride
Rolls-Royce limousines, poor people don't have
enough money to fix their teeth.

I write poetry because my genes and chromosomes fall in
love with young men not young women.

I write poetry because I have no dogmatic responsibility
one day to the next.

[5] COSMOPOLITAN GREETINGS: Poems 1986-1992, by *Allen Ginsberg*. HarperCollins. $20.00. HarperPerennial. $12.00p.

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One is tempted to add, "I write poetry because Sylvester Stallone is a better actor than I am," etc. A number of the poems employ the same device, poems that begin with and repeat phrases like "Research has shown . . ." or "I am Jewish because . . . ," each initial assertion followed by a catalogue of parallels and instances. We have heard this kind of thing before, and it is of little help now that Helen Vendler, who has contributed for this collection a warm endorsement of the poet and his place as a major figure, seems unable on this occasion to distinguish the poetry from the rant, the true from the false or half-true. Whether this poet is, as she claims, "responsible for loosening the breath of American poetry at mid-century" is debatable. From another point of view, that freeing of metric and structure took place long before, and has been the work of many poets, of whom Ginsberg and his contemporaries, as well as the rest of us, are the fortunate heirs.

The poems are all dated, and often the hour of their composition is also noted. The implied spontaneity would be enviable, were it not for the frequent impression of a poem being either disposable or in need of drastic revision. Among the briefer poems is one titled "Sphincter," and which begins, "I hope my good old asshole holds out. . . ." A closely related poem is about reading a book while sitting on the toilet. Will it seem merely churlish to complain about a poem addressed to one's anus? What distinguishes this from any juvenile expression? Only the name, Allen Ginsberg. Once this kind of thing might have seemed daring in its self-exposure; now it is only occasionally amusing.

If you like Allen Ginsberg, here he is, as engaging as ever and, at times at least, as tiresome.

I have saved until the end two books I have particularly valued among those submitted to me: Joan McBreen's *A Walled Garden in Moylough*,[6] and *Selected Poetry, 1937-1990*, by the Brazilian modernist João Cabral de Melo Neto.

McBreen is a contemporary Irish poet, and this is her second book. Until now I had not read her poems, but for me she has been a welcome surprise. Her poems are spare and precise, absolutely clear in their visual attention, her self in no way intrusive, only to the degree necessary for the voice and the point of view. Here are the final two stanzas from a short poem titled "Eanach Cuain," describing a brief past moment in a classroom:

> Impossible to know which is remembered,
> the haunted air, my mother's fingers
> tightening on my arm
>
> or the quickened beat
> of the heart when the room was still
> and filled with silence.

[6] A WALLED GARDEN IN MOYLOUGH, by *Joan McBreen*. Story Line Press. $10.95p.

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A slim book of 52 pages, 42 poems. It has been a pleasure to read them, to appreciate that good, satisfying poems can still be written, as long as there are poets who will concentrate on the art itself and on what remains to be celebrated in the world around us. Her book deserves to be taken as a whole, but here is another poem, brief and entire, "The Clean Slice":

> Beyond the garden's solitude
> is the dark shore, hills and wind.
> A mantle covers somebody passing
> with a lantern. He turns, looks back,
> and in the house where he lived
> sleep his wife, his children.
> He drops his lantern, the light goes out,
> light that once fell as warm shadows
> in a summer garden on sunburnt hands
> and arms, on a woman's hair. In darkness
> he hears their voices grow faint,
> give way to silence, broken only
> by the harsh sound of his son cutting
> bread, the clean slice through the crust.

There it is, clean and bright, typical of the economy of McBreen's language: not a word in excess, a gift in the true sense.

As for Cabral,[7] my choice among these poets, my limited Spanish has been of little help with his Brazilian Portuguese. But the poems, as translated here in a bilingual edition by many hands—by Elizabeth Bishop, Galway Kinnell, W. S. Merwin, and Jane Cooper, among others—give us a fair impression of this major poet. Among the poems I admired, too long to quote here, "Encounter with a Poet" is a striking and memorable elegy in which the poet Miguel Hernandez emerges as a peasant in an arid part of Spain, his voice "not the expurgated voice / of the poet's selected works / but an edition of the wind / not found in libraries." A voice "gone hoarse from war / . . . in the dialect of dust" (translated by Richard Zenith).

Elsewhere, a poem like "The Drafted Vulture" speaks for any minor civil servant merely doing his job, whether serving a warrant or posting an eviction notice—all part of a day's employment. Here is the second part of the poem:

> Though the vulture's a conscript, you can soon tell
> from his demeanor that he's a real professional:
> his self-conscious air, hunched and advisory,

[7] SELECTED POETRY, 1937-1990, by *João Cabral de Melo Neto.* Ed. by *Djelal Kadir.* Wesleyan/University Press of New England. $25.00.

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his umbrella-completeness, the clerical smoothness
with which he acts, even in a minor capacity—
an unquestioning liberal professional.
Trans. by W. S. Merwin

And from another poem I admire, "The Emptiness of Man," the opening lines:

The emptiness of man is not like
any other: not like an empty coat
or empty sack (things which do not stand up
when empty, such as an empty man)
Trans. by Galway Kinnell

The poems are subtle and wise, the work of a man who has seen much of the world and who knows humanity. Beside such work, a Dillard appears as little more than an ambitious amateur.

Is there a lesson for us in the example of a poet like Cabral? I am thinking here of his varied career as a diplomat and adminstrator, of his many activities outside literature, and which compares, for example, with the career of the Finnish poet, Paavo Haavikko, a man of the world and his time in every sense, experienced in business and the theater, in many additional fields, and whose poems are seriously adult when compared with their typical American counterpart. I think too of the Icelandic poets whose work I have come to know: editors and journalists, librarians and engineers, only occasionally a teacher, a professor.

Participation in the world enlarges and deepens the potential poetry, the potential man or woman, and is especially needed now when so much of our common life is narrowed and restricted by a nearly universal specialization. There are, surely, no absolute rules, but the picture of thousands of graduates scribbling verses, or proses, sporting a merit badge that says *Poet,* and with hardly a clue as to their professional isolation—of the cultural forces that inevitably convert them into members of a fringe, a subculture of society—ought to give more of us a moment of pause and reflection. When confronted with the pathology of so much current poetry, its characteristic self-absorption, how refreshing, in the instance of a McBreen or a Cabral, to be able to focus on the poetry and consider its source in the world at large—on the way in which good work, rather then leaving us mired in juvenilia or mental illness, returns us to that world a little more awakened in our senses, confirmed perhaps in a certain faith in existence itself.

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TOM WILHELMUS

Without Color: Zora Neale Hurston

THE CANONIZATION OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON, African-American novelist and anthropologist who lived from 1890 to 1960, as a major figure in American literature, has proceeded rapidly over the last twenty years since her rediscovery by Alice Walker and Mary Helen Washington in the middle 1970s. Current culture wars have accelerated this rise as writers and academicians—usually African-American and feminist—have turned Hurston into an inspirational icon. A series of appreciations, followed by an impressive biography by Robert Hemenway, followed in turn by a selected reader chosen by Walker and Washington, led eventually to official sanction, conferred when Harold Bloom included a volume on Hurston in the Modern Critical Views series in 1984. Around the same time HarperCollins decided to bring all of Hurston's works back into print as part of a project under the general editorship of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., one of the most influential African-American scholars today. Finally, last spring The Library of America published a significant two-volume collection of Hurston's works, edited by Rutgers professor Cheryl A. Wall.[1] Over a thousand pages each, the two volumes appear to confirm Hurston's status as a figure to be studied and appreciated.

The pace of Hurston's emergence seems even more remarkable since at the time of her death in 1960, her work had been out of print for years. In fact, after she had enjoyed a considerable reputation in the 1930s, she had been reduced to poverty, living alone in a small house in Ft. Pierce, Florida. And in late 1959, after she suffered a stroke which left her helpless and distracted, she was forced to move to the St. Lucie County Welfare Home where she died three months later. Alice Walker's poignant "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," published originally in *Ms.* (March 1975) tells the story of the younger writer's search to find and erect a headstone on Hurston's untended grave in Ft. Pierce's segregated "Garden of the Heavenly Rest" cemetery. It was also the article which caused the first stirrings of Hurston's remarkable comeback.

Today, as a result of this comeback, Hurston has been declared a *bona fide* winner: the Hurston bibliography contained in another recently-

[1] ZORA NEALE HURSTON: Novels and Stories, by *Zora Neale Hurston.* Ed. with notes by *Cheryl A. Wall.* The Library of America. $35.00; also ZORA NEALE HURSTON: Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings, by *Zora Neale Hurston.* Ed. with notes by *Cheryl A. Wall.* The Library of America. $35.00.

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published book—*The Collected Stories*, edited by Gates and Sieglinde Lemke, and published by HarperCollins—lists over 150 entries just since the 1970s.[2] Many of these represent the ordinary post-Modernist fustian ("Becoming 'Colored': The Self-Authorized Language of Difference in Zora Neale Hurston"), but all appear to accept Hurston's significance as an exemplary cultural symbol among African-Americans. The irony of such recognition, especially among this particular group of academic scholars, is that when Hurston originally fell from grace during the late 1940s and 1950s, it was because she had lost favor among her own generation of black intellectuals—including Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison—who regarded her as far from the mainstream of black values. Hughes, with whom Hurston had been linked in the 1930s (both were major figures in the Harlem Renaissance) practically accused Hurston of pandering to white patrons. Wright and others criticized her for being too self-interested and not a strong enough supporter of black causes. Moreover, in the fifties, Hurston came to support conservative and Republican politics and ideas. How ironic today that a person who, among other things, spoke out forcefully against school integration and *Brown v. Board of Education* could become an important figure among the *current* generation of scholars, black and white, who (if you believe their press) have been accused of giving themselves over to a crypto-Marxist belief in political correctness and French deconstructionism.

Of course, given her background, one supposes, it *might* even be possible to make Hurston into a 1930s version of Clarence Thomas, but I would prefer to make a case that an appreciation of Zora Neale Hurston might begin by rejecting the politics of race and gender and the overall yin and yang of the culture wars by concentrating more specifically on her individual character as a writer and by suggesting that in some ways not even "art" (or the lack of it) is the issue so much in Hurston's case as the life that animated it. My impression is that Hurston's stories and nonfiction are interesting because they represent the struggle she undertook to understand life on her own terms and to turn it to some personal account. Artistically, her accomplishments are uneven although all of her writings are engaging in some fashion. What strikes me most is the contingency of her creations, the impression they give of being created on the run, yet how they are adapted to the two dominant dilemmas of her personal life: the need to make a living on her own and the need for some sort of idiosyncratic personal identity even at the risk of alienating her peers.

Whatever the conclusion you make about these matters, the value of the new Library of America collection in undertaking such an investigation seems to me indisputable. The handy two-volume collection, divided easily into a volume of novels and stories and a volume of

[2] THE COMPLETE STORIES, by *Zora Neale Hurston*. Introduction by *Henry Louis Gates, Jr.*, and *Sieglinde Lemke*. HarperCollins. $25.00.

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nonfiction, includes virtually everything of importance Hurston wrote. Consistent with the Library's normal practice, each volume contains a minimum of scholarly apparatus—no general introductions, notes held to a pleasing minimum, a useful chronology of Hurston's life and a note on texts. The volume containing the fiction includes all of Hurston's four published novels, *Jonah's Gourd Vine, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Moses, Man of the Mountain,* and *Seraph on the Suwanee,* as well as selected stories. The stories comprise only nine of the twenty-six published in *The Collected Stories* although at least four stories which appear in that collection appear as folklore in the nonfiction volume of The Library of America edition. (One feature of Hurston's writing is her tendency to rewrite and reuse the same elements from one publication to the next—she reminds me of Raymond Carver in this respect—and to move freely between stories she has collected and those she has invented.)

The Library of America is not an unofficial accrediting agency for the American literary canon (although some people would like to think so). When Edmund Wilson in the 1950s and 1960s first suggested the series, the canonical stature of *any* American writer was still open to debate. Moreover, it's hard to see how a series which so freely mixes literary creations with other historical, philosophical, and political writings, memoirs, essays, and travel can conform to any particular idea about what Americans, for their betterment, should read. Therefore, I make no claims that the inclusion of Hurston's two volumes in this series certifies her genius. I am simply happy to read them. And if you ask what a white fellow from the Midwest is doing writing about this author, my answer is simply that all reading, it seems to me, means encountering someone whom you can never completely know or understand, though it is instructive to try.

Who knows what accidents of experience and ambition first lead Zora Neale Hurston to become a writer of fiction, folklore, and general autobiography and polemic? Obviously, some of the formative circumstances originate in the experience of growing up in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, of having a wandering eye and an inquisitive disposition, and of enjoying her mother's love and encouragement. Unfortunately, the early death of her mother and her father's remarriage to a despised and neglectful stepmother meant that she would also learn the negative side of experience. All of these influences are chronicled in both Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine,* and in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road,* as well as in a variety of her earliest stories all set in Eatonville. Another major influence seems to be that, after leaving her home around 1910, while still in her early twenties, she was forced to make a livelihood working at a variety of odd jobs alternately demeaning and inspiring. In 1918 she had the good fortune to wind up in a school where her talents seem to have been immediately recognized by her teachers and professors. And, remarkably, over the next several years she was able to attend first The Morgan Academy, then Howard University, and then Barnard College. She was by turns an

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English major and then (at Barnard) a student of folklore under the great Columbia anthropologist, Franz Boas. Encouraged by Boas, she set out in the late twenties and early thirties to do fieldwork in Negro folk customs, collecting stories in Florida and New Orleans before traveling to Jamaica and Haiti in order to extend her studies among the islands of the Caribbean.

The mixture of personal responsibility, a gift for writing, and training in anthropology results in a uniquely personal style of writing, a hybrid form which is never just one thing but is always pure Hurston. *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, for example, is based firmly on Hurston's youth. A black couple move to Eatonville where the husband rises to a position of eminence as a preacher and, for a while, mayor because of his wife's influence; her death, like the death of Hurston's mother, precipitates the family's downfall. Yet much of the novel's interest lies not in its autobiographical characters but rather in its analysis of an era of black history in the South and the unusual experiment represented by Eatonville itself, the wholly black-inhabited, black-incorporated, and black-administered town located a few miles from Orlando. And the most striking feature of the novel is Hurston's use of black dialect, no doubt also personally observed, but proven as well by other evidence to have been scrupulously researched and recorded (*q.v.* the article "Characteristics of Negro Expression," from *Negro: An Anthology*, among the "Selected Articles" of the nonfiction volume).

The mixture of autobiography and anthropology appears in a reversed form in *Mules and Men*, the first of her two volumes of folklore, which grew out of research she conducted in the late twenties and early thirties when her livelihood came almost entirely from research fellowships and grants, especially those provided by white philanthropist Charlotte Mason (the relationship appears to have been a rather abject one on Hurston's part). Although it is a collection of folktales and "lies" based upon traditional African-American oral storytelling, Hurston could not resist presenting her research as a personal adventure which took her not only to the porch fronts of Eatonville, where she listens to tales about "Ole Massa," "John Henry," and "Brer Dog," but also into the colorful and violent world of the "jook" joints of Polk County. Collecting folktales may have been the excuse for *Mules and Men*, but its real drama lies in Hurston's depiction of the romantic and dangerous lives of the inhabitants of the jooks and of her own involvement with them. This episode is followed by a similar mixed treatment of "hoodoo" research conducted in New Orleans. In the same fashion, *Tell My Horse*, Hurston's other volume of folklore research in Jamaica and Haiti, includes adventures in which she was at some personal risk.

In New York in the early thirties, Hurston sought to exploit her research by attempting to produce a variety of dance and musical performances based on traditional music, preferably in its purest, most authentic form, drawn from both Southern and Caribbean sources. And in general her life seems to have been an enterprising, though hand-

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to-mouth, attempt to keep her head above water. Some observers, Hughes among them, even complained that what she did contained more than a fair amount of posturing. Yet she was certainly capable of sincere accomplishment based upon her own hard-won and deeply-considered insight, a fact revealed in her second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), thought by most critics to be her masterpiece.

Framed as a reminiscence, the work recounts the story about the personal liberation of a woman named Janie, originally from West Florida, who marries and then deserts her first husband (who treats her merely as chattel) and is carried off to Eatonville by Joe Starks, who by cunning and ambition rises to become mayor of the town. He also regards women only as adornments, however, and it is only when he dies and Janie is able to run off with a third man, Tea Cake, that she finds fulfillment. Together she and Tea Cake labor and love and establish a true relationship of equals beyond the safety of mere physical comfort and social position. Although Tea Cake dies (killed in fact by Janie's hand), this tragedy is balanced against the sense of freedom and self-understanding which Janie has attained and her sense that she carries Tea Cake within her.

The real question of Hurston's loyalty and honesty to her personal vision is concerned with how to interpret this liberation. To be sure Janie is black and she is a woman, but what she seems truly interested in is a more personal, and in some senses transpersonal, liberation. As early as 1928 in an essay entitled "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston declared that she was not "tragically colored" and laid claim to a life that belongs not to members of this or that group but "to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less"—an opinion she was to repeat in essay and autobiographical writings throughout her career. Politically such statements would inevitably cost her friends, but artistically it suggests that Hurston's instincts lay beyond the kind of sociological analysis so popular in her day and in our own. Actually, she appears to have much in common with those other great Modernist novelists and poets, romantic individualists, whose vision is ecstatic and, in fact, anti-political. Therefore, while Janie's vision may include the need to be liberated from the burdens of race and gender, it also includes the notion that the self—sexual, ecstatic, and "human"—supersedes everything else.

Like D.H. Lawrence, whose earlier naturalism gives way to a period of apocalyptic and satirical polemic, in her next novel—*Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939)—Hurston leaves the safety of Eatonville and her scientific observations behind and creates something at once more allegorical and more rhetorical. By retelling the Moses story, even more by retelling it using the black dialect of the American South, she mystified her critics even more and naturally suffered the consequences, although, in fact, in terms of theme and dramatic interest the novel is polished and intelligently written. Once again, the book exploits ideas that appear in Hurston's other polemical and autobiographical writings

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of the time and seeks, like them, to pursue the idea of selfhood in the midst of pressures to accede to both social and racial demands. For one thing, Hurston's choice to present the question of Moses' birth as an unresolved mystery (was he an Egyptian or was he a Hebrew?) gets directly to the point that "a little pigmentation more or less" should not be the quality which determines a person's stature or nobility. In fact it is the Hebrews, the oppressed, who continually insist that race makes a difference, alternately apologizing for themselves or for what they fear might be a weakness in Moses, their liberator, by invoking their inherent inferiority as a people. (They speak in black dialect.) Moses himself is on a mission from God, one he would happily relinquish, but as a superior man his destiny is fixed. Why he is superior is open to discussion. Are his noble looks and his superiority in battle an accident of birth? Even if they are, he is not defined by his class or his circumstances and mixes freely with people who are of inferior birth. He learns and grows incessantly, where he can.

These ideas parallel those in such nonfiction pieces as "My People, My People!," "Religion," and "Seeing the World As It Is"—chapters of Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road.* And one can see their extension into political statements addressing such matters as the fund raising practices of Southern black colleges ("The Rise of the Begging Joints") and *Brown v. Board of Education* ("Court Order Can't Make Races Mix"—essentially an argument that insisting that black schools are inferior creates the illusion that blacks are themselves inferior despite compelling evidence to the contrary). But the real issue as it pertains to *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is whether the individual self has claims to a relationship with the infinite.

An even more difficult novel to interpret in this regard, and surely some kind of an artistic failure, is Hurston's final published work of fiction, *Seraph on the Suwanee,* which appeared in 1948. The novel tells the tale of a poor white woman from West Florida whose lifelong marriage to an energetic husband documents the rise of the so-called "cracker" class from poverty to economic success by turning central Florida from a land of swamps and alligators to a land of orange groves and golf courses. A troubling book for a variety of reasons, surely the greatest hurdle it presents is its suggestion that the kind of Babbittry that has turned Florida (and about everywhere else) into a land of strip malls and football factories, is a laudable form of progress.

The central notion of the novel focuses on another case of individual liberation similar to the one in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Indeed, the woman, Arvay, has obvious features in common with the character Janie in the earlier novel: they are both from West Florida, both poor, both socially encapsulated, but struggling for satisfaction. And both apparently attain it. It is nonetheless the manner in which Arvay attains her salvation which is hardest to accept since it comes through an acknowledgment of the superior authority of her husband.

I have no easy answer for these concerns. Arvay is, in fact, a victim, a

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white "cracker" who thinks fondly of her own ignorance and believes that poverty is somehow a virtue. In fact, she is to be pitied and is as in need of liberation as any oppressed person, of any color. To this degree, *Seraph on the Suwanee* looks like an experiment on Hurston's part to see how far her vision of a "pigmentless" society can be extended to a woman who in other circumstances might seem like her enemy. But it is one thing to argue that the slow-witted and unimaginative Arvay must be liberated, and quite another, at the end of the novel, to provide her with a vision of herself as "Holy Mary" (who was "poor and unlearnt too") who must serve her husband in the same unquestioning way that Mary had served Jesus.

Is this meant to be ironic? Unfortunately, I don't think so. As unappealing as this message is to today's readers, it is couched in radiant imagery as the sun rises over the ocean creating a "rosy path across the crinkling water straight to [Arvay] to look and see if she was carrying out her work." Similar language occurs in the (suppressed) chapter, "Seeing the World As It Is," from *Dust Tracks on a Road*, when Hurston speaks of the pleasure she has given herself of "sunrises blooming out of oceans, and sunset drenching heaped-up clouds." Such language indicates both the strength and the weakness of Hurston's later career, the grandiose gesture which accompanies the heroic desire to merge the soul with the infinite, and which may also in fact indicate a retreat into self and tradition.

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GARY KRIST

Comedy

THE SEARCH FOR A PRECISE DEFINITION of the term "comedy" has led to the felling of many a forest over the years. Monographs, tracts, and theses on the topic abound, moldering away in the stacks of university libraries from Nanjing to New Haven. Far be it from me to add any more paper to that particular mound ("The genre of comedy traces its roots back to ancient Dionysian fertility rites, etc., etc. . . ."), but this publishing quarter *has* been an unusually fecund one for comic novels—or at least for novels that I consider, in a broad sense, comic. The five titles reviewed below are just a few of the more notable examples. Of course, not all of these comic novels are consistently funny. But I've become convinced over the years that the comic and the funny have less to do with each other than we normally think. The comic, I feel (okay, okay, cut down just one more little white pine), is primarily a product of an author's attitude toward his or her material; ironic distance is its key defining characteristic. The funny, on the other hand, has more to do with the nature of the material itself, relying heavily on blatant reversals and incongruous juxtapositions. Maybe the best way to explain the distinction I sense is to give examples: A sprinter who runs a race with a cigarette in his mouth is funny. But an account of a 100-meter foot race that cheerfully takes note of the fact that the event has been co-sponsored by the Philip Morris Company—that's comic.

The title of Jane Smiley's new comic novel *Moo* is, of course, funny.[1] It's derived from the moniker Moo U., the affectionate nickname for the Midwestern university that is the setting for this long, rambling, but always entertaining book. Moo U., we're told, started out as a humble agricultural college back when subjects like horticulture and slaughterhouse technique needed to be taught to the strapping farm lads of the Great Plains. However, in the atmosphere of late-twentieth-century America, the school has taken on pretensions of cosmopolitanism. In fact, the university is now a perfect microcosm of the great multi-culti society of our time, bristling with factions and camps and cabals, each competing for a bigger hunk of the educational pie. To quote one of the more cogent characters in the book: "[The university] had become, more than anything, a vast network of interlocking wishes, some of them modest, some of them impossible, many of them conflicting, many of them complementary."

[1] MOO, by *Jane Smiley*. Alfred A. Knopf. $24.00.

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It would require more space than I'm allowed here even to begin recounting the intricacies of Ms. Smiley's plot. Suffice it to say that she orchestrates with admirable deftness the university's numerous internecine skirmishes—including its major one, the conflict over a huge corporation's offer of generous research grants in exchange for the university's imprimatur on a plan to mine for gold in a rare Costa Rican cloud forest. The proposal is a classic free-market *quid pro quo*—as crass as it is compelling—and someone unfamiliar with current-day university administration might expect that such bargaining with Mammon would be strongly discouraged in a temple of higher learning. Hardly. Nowadays, it seems, the university is just as beholden as any other business to the forces of the market. Greed has become the new engine of academia; satisfaction of greed its ultimate, forever-unattainable goal. In the world of *Moo*, the modern university has become a kind of self-interested Darwinian entity devoted primarily to the propagation of careers, buildings, and political agendas via the accumulation of grants and tuition.

Because Smiley's goal here is to satirize the foibles and pretensions of an entire community, *Moo* has been compared by more than one critic to the work of Balzac, and for once the extravagant reviewerly comparison is not entirely invalid. Like Balzac, Smiley takes a panoramic and gently ironic view of her territory, worrying more about breadth than depth. But Smiley's stance toward her characters is just a little too chilly and cautious for the comparison to be truly sound. Yes, there is a full complement of villains and good guys in *Moo* (and you can usually distinguish them by what they eat and drive), but virtually all of them are depicted from the same safe ironic distance, relegating all to the same level of comic absurdity. Such a democracy of mild ridicule may be laudable from the viewpoint of journalistic fairness, but it makes for a rather wan comedy. Smiley is neither sufficiently kind nor sufficiently nasty here to give her novel much of an edge. The ultimate effect is a little like watching the goings-on in an ant-farm. Thus, although *Moo* moves along pleasantly enough, it is, in the end, just a little too easy to forget.

Insufficient nastiness is a criticism that will never be leveled at Martin Amis. In his latest novel, *The Information*, he is relentlessly—and bracingly—vicious, and for this he deserves nothing but praise.[2] There's been a lot of table talk about the story behind the novel—how Amis dumped his long-time agent and hired the evil Andrew Wiley in her place, how he used some of the ridiculously generous proceeds from that decision to buy a ridiculously expensive set of false teeth, etc.—but since I'm interested only in fictional comedies here, I'll put all of that aside. Frankly, I don't know whether *The Information* is worth its

[2] THE INFORMATION, by *Martin Amis*. Harmony Books/Crown. $24.00.

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unprecedented $800,000 British advance, and I don't care. The book is bloody marvelous at any price.

The standard critical line on the novel has been that it is primarily a story of "literary envy," which must be a phrase cooked up by the publisher and subtly placed into the minds of reviewers, since everyone who's written about the book seems to have adopted this particular turn of phrase. This is a shame, because the novel is really about a lot more than that. On the surface, of course, it *is* about literary envy. The envier in question—Richard Tull—is a painfully intelligent, painfully self-conscious writer whose taste for painfully difficult fiction has doomed him to failure as a novelist. To make a living, he's forced to spend his time writing 500-word reviews of second-rate 1000-page biographies. The source of Richard's envy is one Gwyn Barry, an old friend who, though clearly a hack, has somehow managed to make himself an international literary sensation with an insipid little novel called *Amelior.* A disbelieving Richard must stand by while his far stupider friend is feted, fawned upon, and generally lionized, the pain becoming more intense with each new television interview or book tour Gwyn is offered. Eventually, Richard feels compelled to seek revenge. Casting aside any inconvenient scruples, he initiates various plots to sabotage his friend's good fortune, going so far as to hire some local toughs to assault Gwyn on the street.

Literary envy? It's as good a term as any, I suppose, for Richard's condition. But the deeper one probes the source of Richard's seething hatred for Gwyn, the more convinced one becomes that it is not so much *literary* envy that he feels as youth envy, serotonin-and-testosterone envy, the envy of a mere mortal for someone who seems to have cheated the powers of decay and death. Because *that* is what Richard truly cannot abide—the fact that Gwyn's success gives him a kind of temporary immortality, granting him the prestige and power of youth in middle age, allowing him to defy the very same gravity of age to which Richard succumbs more completely every day. Gwyn, in short, plays Dorian Gray to Richard's portrait in the attic, growing ever more youthful and attractive while his alter ego deteriorates in obscurity.

Ultimately, then, *The Information* is less about the unfair vagaries of literary taste than it is about the fundamental injustice of mortality. Death is an outrage, never mind its inevitability. In an unfair world, it is the unfairest cut of all. The question posed by the novel is this: Granted, everyone must die, but why must I? It's an excellent question, profound in its paradox. And rarely has it been asked with as much cleverness as Amis provides in this witty and intelligent book.

Bitterness like Richard Tull's may seem a difficult quality to depict comically, but the bitter and the comic are actually never very far away from each other on the grand color wheel of emotion—an insight that finds further corroboration this quarter in *Polite Society,* a first novel by

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Melanie Sumner.[3] This story of an aimless Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal begins and ends in bitterness, but a bitterness of rare eloquence and comic pungency:

> When I was twenty-five, I ran away from home. My parents cheered me on. By that time I had lost a series of demeaning jobs and let my boyfriend get away. On brief sojourns to universities, I had squandered money like a queen. When I settled back into the house, I smoked in bed and complained about the food. I drank all of the bourbon then filled the bottles with iced tea. More than once I told my mother she didn't love me, just to watch her cry.

As that excerpt suggests, Darren Parkman, the protagonist of *Polite Society*, is not exactly in great psychological shape when she arrives in Senegal, having chosen to join the Peace Corps for the most nebulous of reasons. And her situation grows even more precarious when she discovers that the school at which she was supposed to teach has closed indefinitely because of a labor strike. With a big, empty apartment in Dakar and nothing much to do beyond its walls, Darren quickly succumbs to indolence, taking on a couple of Senegalese lovers whom she proceeds to alienate with her alcoholism and erratic behavior. This is not, one suspects, what the Peace Corps had in mind when they approved her application.

What is most refreshing about Sumner's novel is its defiant description of what might be called a reverse coming-of-age story. Unlike the protagonist of the garden-variety *Bildungsroman*, Darren doesn't begin in innocence and simplicity and evolve toward a more complex understanding of her situation. Indeed, the opposite process seems to occur. In Senegal, Darren's world view appears to polarize into an almost Manichean duality—everyone around her becomes either her enemy or her savior, sometimes swinging from one role to the other in the space of minutes. Moreover, Darren's personality doesn't temper or mature with time. She's not a very nice person to begin with, and by the end of the novel she remains entirely unredeemed.

This, it seems to me, is a pretty gutsy choice for a first novelist—taking an unsympathetic protagonist and making her even less sympathetic by the end of the book—but I feel that Sumner gets away with it for the most part. She is expert at suggesting the ineffable psychological forces behind self-destructive behavior, and she does the dazed-and-confused thing better than just about any Generation X-er I've come across. For all of its line-to-line artistry, however, her book is seriously weak in its overall structure. Sumner's narrative shifts uneasily and inexplicably between first- and third-person, and there's even a stand-alone first chapter populated entirely by characters who never reappear in the

[3] POLITE SOCIETY, by *Melanie Sumner*. Houghton Mifflin. $21.95.

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story. Ms. Sumner would like us to believe, I'm sure, that this is simply the way the story *had* to be told, but I have my doubts. To me, the book seems only half-cooked, as if the author had been writing bits and pieces of it for some time and now wanted to cobble them together to create a book-length work without taking time to make the whole thing cohere. This kind of fragmentary, chaotic structure is characteristic of many recent first books, and I think it a sham—less a reflection of the fragmentary, chaotic quality of modern experience than a reflection of the hands-off, no-time-for-niceties quality of book editing in the 1990s.

But *Polite Society* is full of wonderful parts (one chapter—"Naar"—is absolutely brilliant), and that, I suppose, is reward enough. I've had my eye on Sumner ever since reading a superb story of hers in *Boulevard* magazine several years ago. This hurried shard of a novel comes as a slight disappointment after the expectations raised by that story, but it doesn't dissuade me from my hunch that Melanie Sumner is destined for a significant career as a fiction writer.

Of course, it's impossible to talk about contemporary comic novelists without at least mentioning William Boyd, whose latest book, *The Blue Afternoon*, appeared this quarter.[4] I've been a faithful reader of Boyd's work for years, despite the fact that I've found nearly every one of his books problematic in one way or another. He can exasperate with his excesses of artifice, his predilection for stock characters, and his often overwrought prose, but his novels are always insidiously readable, a fact that seems to have won him as many detractors among the highbrows as it has adherents among the middles. He's written at least one novel that I consider both excellent and important—namely, *An Ice-Cream War*, his beautifully detailed account of a forgotten African war, which contains some of the most horrifying comic war scenes I've ever read. His early work also includes a collection of somewhat immature short stories (*On the Yankee Station*) and two straightforward comic novels—*A Good Man in Africa*, his generally overpraised comedy of British neocolonialism, and *Stars and Bars*, a hilarious but paper-thin comedy of an English art dealer drowning in the cultural miasma of the American South.

In his more recent work Boyd seems to have left comedy behind. I missed *The New Confessions*, but I did read his rather ambitious *Brazzaville Beach*, a ruminative fantasia written from the perspective of a former primate researcher. The novel is as engrossing as anything else Boyd has written, but it's marred, I feel, by an annoying schematism in the characters and plot (it's easier to get away with schematism in comedies than in so-called "serious" fiction). The result is a main character—Hope Clearwater—who remains maddeningly elusive. One hates to curse an author by claiming that "he can't write women," but in Boyd's case I fear it might be true.

And now he's added force to the accusation with *The Blue Afternoon*,

[4] THE BLUE AFTERNOON, by *William Boyd*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

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his sixth and most technically inept novel, which contains not one but two truly fuzzy female characters. The book is supposed to be a first-person narrative related by Kay Fischer, a thirtyish female architect in LA in 1936. As the novel opens, Kay is leading a life of diminished personal expectations, her marriage and business partnerships having both failed, though with varying degrees of amiability. Burned twice, she is now attempting to focus, to build up a body of design work expressing the aesthetic of her spiritual mentor, one Oscar Kranewitter, a Bauhaus outcast who cultivated an "abstruse" and "ascetic" brand of "ruthless consistency" in his architecture. As one can probably ascertain from these descriptors, Boyd intends us to draw the conclusion that poor Kay needs some loosening up—that (to borrow the idiom of 1930s' LA) she needs to let down her hair, take off her glasses, and experience a little grand romance.

The instrument of her sentimental education, thank God, turns out not to be some oversexed *National Geographic* photographer with hard-muscled arms, but rather a dignified old surgeon, Salvador Carriscant, who turns up at her studio one day claiming to be her father. Kay keeps her distance at first, but—for reasons that remain entirely obscure—she eventually agrees to accompany him to Portugal to seek out a long-lost love whom he last saw in the Philippines some thirty years earlier. On the way over, he tells Kay the story of that love, a story that comprises the bulk of the book.

And it's here that the ineptitude sets in. Carriscant's story is ostensibly narrated by Kay. Boyd wants us to believe that she heard the story enough times and in enough depth to reconstruct it down to its minutest detail. But this is patently incredible, given the density and completeness of the narration, and it's really a pointless exercise on top of it all, since there seems to be no significant ironic distance between the tale and the teller. Indeed, irony of any type is in short supply in this book. Boyd seems lately to be eschewing irony for earnestness, and the result has been an unfortunate didacticism. Here he seems to be saying that passionate obsessions, while they may diminish our moral character, enhance our souls—a lesson that Kay and the rest of us twentieth-century victims of emotional atrophy apparently need to learn. It's not a bad sermon, I suppose, but it could have been delivered more effectively without the cumbersome tale-within-a-tale machinery that Boyd erects so effortfully here.

Having said that, I must note that the story itself *is* colorful, suspenseful, and utterly absorbing. By the end, when Salvador and Kay finally find his lost lover, Boyd has managed to invest the search with enough emotional wallop to make the technical infelicities seem forgivable. He's written a largely unironic tale of a grand passion—not your reviewer's particular cup of tea, as you've probably guessed—but even a skeptic like me couldn't help being moved. *The Blue Afternoon* is hardly a great novel, but it may very well be a great read.

Finally, if one is looking for a tale of grand passion that is somewhat

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less, well, pompous than William Boyd's, one can hardly do better than *The Love Letter,* the utterly delightful fourth novel to emerge from the utterly delightful mind of Cathleen Schine.[5] Here's a comic novel that happens to be very, very funny. It's also elegantly structured, unfailingly endearing, and (overlooking the author's occasional tendency to misuse the subjective form of the verb "to be") scrupulously well-written. If anyone out there is looking for a place to hang Dorothy Parker's old mantle (now that Dawn Powell is no longer using it), Cathleen Schine's shoulders might prove suitable.

The focus of the story is Helen MacFarquhar, the owner of a small independent bookstore in an old seaside town somewhere in Maine. Helen, a forty-two-year-old divorcée with a child conveniently off at camp, is nothing if not provocative. Attractive, intelligent, and mercurial, she seems to regard the act of bookselling specifically—and the act of living generally—as a kind of extended flirtation, keeping customers, friends, and employees off-balance with her sudden changes of mood and intense but intermittent attentions. If she isn't snarling at people, she's kissing them, and then pushing them away again. This kind of behavior, like most other forms of psychological torture, tends to enslave even as it frustrates, and Helen's employees—most notably Johnny, her twenty-year-old clerk—soon begin to yearn for her approval the way Tantalus yearns for those grapes that keep eluding his grasp.

But then the love letter finds its way into the store. A torrid expression of passion addressed to "Goat" from "Ram," the letter appears mysteriously in the mail one day. Helen reads it. So, somewhat later, does Johnny. And in the charged atmosphere of summer, the words (intended for neither party) begin to work their subtle magic. As the balmy days pass, Helen—forty-two, and someone who takes pleasure in people "the way herpetologists take pleasure in reptiles"—and Johnny—twenty, and much given to earnest blushing—find themselves falling in love. Or, as Johnny would say it, way in love.

Hard to believe? Perhaps in synopsis. But one of the little miracles that Schine pulls off in this book is making the affair between Helen and Johnny entirely credible. Schine is as manipulative in her way as Helen is, and she manages ever so craftily to plant the seeds of plausibility in her readers even as she plants them in her characters. Thus, when those seeds germinate, we find ourselves believing in the mutual infatuation. Indeed, we even become a little infatuated ourselves.

In a different kind of comic novel, of course, Helen's behavior might be grounds for a very funny sexual harassment suit. But this is Pequot, Maine, a charmed world where engaged couples register at the local bookstore, where the town librarian is called Miss Skattergoods, and where a young girl can go out to get everyone coffee and come back saying: "One has steamed milk and regular coffee, one has steamed milk

[5] THE LOVE LETTER, by *Cathleen Schine.* Houghton Mifflin. $19.95.

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and espresso, one has regular milk and regular coffee. I don't know which is which, I don't know which is called what, and I don't remember anymore which I wanted." Is it any wonder that the people in this town fall in love with each other, no matter how inappropriately?

Speaking of falling, a good number of trees have been falling lately in the name of *The Love Letter*. The book has made a couple of hardcover bestseller lists, and will probably be the beach reading of choice once the paperback appears. And to this I have only one thing to say: "Timber!" If trees must fall in the name of comedy, they could do far worse than fall for Cathleen Schine.

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THOMAS FILBIN

Why Ask Why?

NO SCANDAL IN RECENT YEARS INVOLVING THE CATHOLIC CHURCH has been as shocking as that of pedophile priests. Sexual contact with children initiated by those with authority over them is so repugnant that calling it "wrong" sounds almost neutral. Where the transgressor holds a religious office, the antediluvian word "sin" at least has enough hiss in it to express outrage. Thomas M. Disch has taken up the matter in a fictional way,[1] and he does so not to examine or reckon with the phenomenon so much as use it as a vehicle to assail Catholicism, root and branch, from its clerical infrastructure to its doctrinal underpinnings.

The villain and central figure, Father Patrick Bryce, was ordained in the 1960s after theology studies in Rome, but soon found himself spiritually adrift. As a Minneapolis seminary instructor in the seventies, he would occasionally have sex with a student after too many cocktails, telling himself the next morning that he was the one who had been led into temptation. In later parish assignments the objects of his desires are altar boys between the ages of eleven and fourteen. When the parents of one of them come forward to the bishop, Father Bryce is packed off to a Church-run clinic in Arizona for treatment. It is useful for him, but not in the way it was intended. He first takes comfort in learning he is not, within a classical definition, a pedophile, one who desires prepubescent children but rather an ephebophile, from the Greek *ephebos*, which means "young man." He also discovers how better to practice and conceal his vice, hearing testimony in group therapy as to the effectiveness of foot massages and shiatsu in overcoming a boy's initial reluctance to be touched. Bryce returns to Minnesota not cured of anything, but confirmed in his ways and even less cautious. By the nineties he is a lost man with a drinking problem who is being blackmailed. One of his victims, now an adult, comes to Bryce in the confessional and recites not his own but the priest's acts with him when he was younger.

"For about a month it was almost every day. A few times he was wearing his vestments," the voice whispers through the dark to the priest. "Is it starting to come back, Father Pat?. . . Do you know who I am . . . do you remember my name? I was pretty cute back then, and short for my age. I looked more like thirteen . . . maybe even twelve."

Another man calls on the telephone, threatening him with exposure

[1] THE PRIEST: A Gothic Romance, by *Thomas M. Disch.* Alfred A. Knopf. $24.00.

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unless he submits to a series of strange demands, including having a portrait of Satan tattooed on his chest. Finally the bishop, knowing enough to have the priest arrested, commands him to take over an anti-abortion center whose purpose is to kidnap young women contemplating ending their pregnancies and hold them against their will until they give birth. The bishop has apparently had in mind exacting some *quid pro quo* since Bryce was sent away, given the fact that the legal and medical cost of securing the victim's silence was $200,000, which the diocese paid directly since liability insurance had become unobtainable due to so many instances of priestly misconduct. "As well try to get flood insurance in Bangladesh," the bishop quips.

Beyond the private hell of his own making in the present, Bryce has begun to have blackouts which transport him to the thirteenth century where he assumes the identity of Silvanus de Roquefort, a provincial French bishop about to be caught up in an inquisitorial pursuit of heresy. The rest of the plot is a picaresque waterfall of events which includes the rescue of two of the captive teenage mothers, a wonderful scene with an oratory full of bats, and the revelation that Bryce was fathered by a priest.

Thomas M. Disch is a writer whose work includes literate sci-fi, gothic horror, and the unconventional, and he uses elements from all of these styles to create a clever fable of depravity. But he opts to avoid matters of cause and effect, preferring to paint this wretched priest in a monochromatic way and leave him to stand like a billboard announcement of his own repulsiveness. This approach to Father Bryce's character could be summed up by the recent beer commercial's question: "Why ask why?" Disch is probably of the opinion that although it might interest psychiatric researchers to know what propels people to prey sexually on children, in most other ways it is unimportant, for asking it implies there is some answer which could provide justification or at least mitigation of the guilt.

No priest in this morality play is depicted as admirable; they are inadequate men when not outright hypocrites, failures, or fools, following the party line on abortion and birth control, although some scarcely believe what they say. In the confessional they often absolve with hidden sympathy the same acts they damn from the pulpit. Some of the priests are gay (although Disch in no way connects pedophilia with homosexuality), but have to remain painfully closeted and publicly abhor what they privately practice. Disch's unstated but hardly unnoticeable premise is that the system keeping Father Bryce in place is not so much flawed as bankrupt, the acts of the ministers serving as further proof that the institution is unworthy of credibility. But even believers concede that wickedness is not news in the annals of the Church; the lives of the popes in particular from the Avignon period to the Reformation comprise a veritable catalogue of unclerical acts, from simony to sodomy, with many others in between. (A shortlist of papal pastimes would include adultery, fornication, nepotism, hedonism, compulsive

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spending, ostentation, murder and international intrigue, gluttony, larceny, bribery, blasphemy, bastardy, and nonpayment of bills.) Lesser clergy were limited only by the lack of opportunity from emulating the pontiffs.

I must admit to always being of two minds whenever I read anything about the Catholic Church; on the one hand I am a nonbeliever of Voltairean proportions, and on the other I have a great deal of residual sympathy for people who are religious, having once been that way myself. I attended parochial school in the fifties when meatless Fridays, mite boxes, and saving pagan babies occupied the Catholic consciousness. I then labored at a Jesuit high school, which for all its rigidity saved me from being an utter fool, was an altar boy, and even spent a year in the diocesan seminary. I believed as strongly as anyone until I ran head on into the question "why," and my whys eventually demanded answers no doctrines could satisfy. I left for a secular education, the study of philosophy, and eventually dismissed religion as implausible when it wasn't outright silly. I am an empiricist and an agnostic, although on some days I lean toward deism, as involving not a God or god, but rather an ineffable infinity whose essence is not in cathedrals or revelations, but in the natural laws of the universe. I am thus an odd character witness for Catholic priests, but the many I studied under and lived with were generally men of sincerity who combined religious impulses with careers in teaching, social work, hospital chaplaincy, and refugee aid. None to my knowledge were pedophiles.

My reaction to *The Priest* is admiration for its outrage and vividness, but disappointment that a bombshell, however interesting and well written, took the place of a more serious and wide-angled drama. I would have been happier with less caricature and more illustration, but a novelist is not bound to make any story a balanced treatment of an issue, and Disch no doubt feels that an angry, savage unmasking is not only an option, but a literary duty. Two older novels came to mind as I read this which attempted character studies of priests, neither of which spared the failed humanity of their subjects from candid observation. Henry Morton Robinson's *The Cardinal* from 1950 dealt with a trolley conductor's son who rises to be a prince of the church, but whose purer motives always run parallel with tendencies to worldly ambition and intellectual vanity. Edwin O'Connor's *The Edge of Sadness*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1962, unsentimentally examined alcoholism and loneliness. Neither of these is anti-clerical nor anti-Catholic, while *The Priest* is truly both, not in a know-nothing sense, but in the way the Enlightenment used ridicule as antiseptic. Another contrasting work, *Elmer Gantry*, for all the hostility it evoked from believers was no more than sardonic, as Sinclair Lewis retained at least a drop of empathy for the hypocritical preacher, because he was such an earnest and natural fraud. Patrick Bryce enjoys no such redemptive back glances from his fictional creator because he is more than corrupt, he is incorrigibly dangerous.

Disch properly makes a case for less politeness and more opposition

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to religion when its superstitions demand human sacrifice. Should we not be moved to anger when the Pope visits a third world nation, plagued with poverty, squalor, disease, and hunger, and the best he has to say to the people is that birth control is morally wrong? It could be that gothic horror in explosive bursts is the only fitting response to the bad acts of priests and the harmful doctrines of their theology.

Nonreligious people reading this book will have their suspicions confirmed, I suppose, while observant Catholics will probably avoid it, and that is unfortunate. If their denomination is ever to reform itself into a modern community of belief and action, it will only be by taking in all the problems and contradictions of life and dealing with them rationally, not by fleeing into the narcotic of impossible dogmas and escapist devotions. *The Priest* is distasteful medicine for Catholics, but the flavor is no excuse for rejecting it.

I am reminded of the story of a conservative, patrician, Roman cardinal who some years ago was offering his criticisms of the Catholic Church in the United States to a North American brother. It was too pragmatic, worldly, and liberal, he said; it was more focused on the brick and mortar building of schools and hospitals than on souls. It had, he lamented, lost its spiritual essence by trying to be part of the world, a morally wayward one at that, given the influence of Hollywood and material values.

"In Latin America, though, Catholicism means spirituality," he concluded.

The North American cardinal burst forth with frustration, "How can you say that? In Latin America the only people in church are a few old women mumbling their rosaries. Most of the men only go there to be baptized, married, and buried. Religion has no impact on daily life or politics, and seems to take pride in its detachment."

"Ah," replied the Italian prelate, "but the faith there is so pure."

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HAROLD FROMM

Postmodern Ecologizing: Circumference Without a Center

EVERY NOW AND THEN A REVIEWER FINDS HE IS SORRY to have undertaken to review a book that initially looked promising, because he knows that the outcome will probably make everyone unhappy. The reviewer will be unhappy because no matter what position he takes, he will be dissatisfied with the consequences. The author of the book will be unhappy because he is almost certain to feel he has been treated unfairly. And the readers of the review may very well be confounded by an emphasis on the book as a constructed artifact rather than as a vehicle for "contents."

I fear I am about to embark on just such a no-win exercise in trying to provide a fitting account of Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*,[1] a book with a title more global and ambitious than its contents warrant. It has been given an enthusiastic launching by Harvard University Press and has been much-bruited in ecocritical circles. At the very moment I had finished my reading and was despairing about how to handle it, I received in the mail from Harvard UP a publicity sheet filled with puffs designed to make me feel even more rotten. My minimal consolation is that, apart from my own quirky response, I am sure the book will be well-received, highly praised, and provide a generation of graduate students in American Studies (though generations are very brief these days) with plenty of material for dissertations, scholarly articles, and sessions for MLA conventions.

A hint of the problems to be faced occurs in the first paragraph of Buell's introduction:

> This book has refused to remain the modest undertaking I intended it to be. Planned as a history of Thoreauvian writing about the American natural environment, it has led me into a broad study of environmental perception, the place of nature in the history of western thought, and the consequences for literary scholarship and indeed for humanistic thought in general of attempting to imagine a

[1] THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture, by *Lawrence Buell.* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. $35.00.

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> more "ecocentric" way of being. I found that I could not discuss green writing without relating it to green thinking and green reading.

Having just read the book, I am forced to admit that I don't recall most of these immense aims being realized in any substantial way, though the subjects are more or less taken up at one point or another. The result, says Buell, "is an exploratory work with several foci rather than one," and that may be a large part of the problem. Buell attempts to rationalize this by saying, "The combination of broad sweep and cranky hyperfocus [on Thoreau] of which I have forewarned is, I think, in keeping with the nature of environmental representation, which is at least faintly present in most texts but salient in few." Whether "environmental representation" has a "nature" and whether this is it are open questions, but the book still seems unfocused and even its key terms, like "environment" and "ecological," remain somewhat cloudy (quite apart from the fuzzy syntax of the sentence itself). When I turned the final page, I was left with the sense of a very learned ramble rather than "a broad study." Had the book's title and contents adhered to Buell's original plan, something like "Thoreau and Nature Writing in Nineteenth-Century America," the reader's expectations would likely have been more helpfully confined because that is where the major emphasis appears to be.

Before I report on a few of the book's strengths, I would prefer to address other matters. Buell, a professor of English at Harvard, is probably one of the most learned of the Americanists now dominating the academic scene. His reading and interests, well represented by 137 pages of densely bibliographical notes (roughly one quarter of the book), are not merely impressive, they are stunning. His acquaintance with world literature, the other arts, philosophy, history, and criticism is matched by the remarkable depth of his knowledge of American literary (and non-literary) culture. Not only has he read the obscurest of American texts, "ancient" and modern, but his retention of their minute particularity is daunting. His prose is unusually allusive, echoing other writers on every page, and his acquaintance with contemporary culture—from high to pop—is up-to-the-minute. He is so on top of just about everything that, perverse as it may seem, his mastery of the current moment of the flux of western culture served for me as a *memento mori*, a precarious virtuoso athletic feat that called to mind the king of the woods—doomed to be displaced by a younger and stronger hero—that Frazer had so much to say about in *The Golden Bough*, a myth of transience, mortality, and eternal recurrence. The very brilliance of Buell's juggling act, his lifelong workaholism combined with a super-subtle sensibility and powerful intelligence, left me not only awed but somewhat depressed insofar as they bespoke both the desiderata and the futility of what nowadays constitutes an ideal academic career. In the back of my head I kept hearing Yeats's lines, "Everything that man esteems / Endures a moment or a day." To this, of course, one might

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reply, "So what?" Should the temporariness and impermanence of things preclude superhuman effort? Is the fact of mortality an argument for mediocrity? But things are more complicated than that.

Not only is Buell gifted with a magisterial intellect—calling to mind such polymaths as Harold Bloom and George Steiner—but he has an excellence of judgment and a scrupulous, rare sort of sanity and self-awareness far beyond the level of today's bemused race of frequently screwball academics. I don't recall him ever being taken in by anything nonsensical or merely trendy, nor is he conned by phony pieties, even when they are ecological. When he *is* sympathetic to politically correct shibboleths (and he generally is), he is still likely to express some reservation, some sense of balance, some residue of doubt. He is an intellectual, then, for whom I can personally acknowledge a great deal of respect.

If that's the case, then why all this twitching and dancing? Just what is my problem with *The Environmental Imagination?* I think my allusion to Harold Bloom and George Steiner could offer some assistance here (and I might as well throw in Camille Paglia for good measure, since I treated her at length only recently in these pages). What differentiates these three polymath thinkers so sharply from Buell is that to one degree or another they're all a bit crazy. Their emotional, powerful, intemperate, intrepid, sometimes screws-loose writings are the products of overwhelming visions, *idées fixes*, strong moral convictions, sweeping prose styles, and imperial selves that make them appear to have some inner, profound, subterraneous connection with the universe that the rest of us wimpy mortals lack, however wrong-headed and ridiculous they all at times can be. The things they have to say alter our consciousness willy-nilly, even if we disagree with them and feel they've gone off the deep end. Yet at the same time, while I would be very amenable to following Buell's lead on most of the subjects he addresses, I would be quite wary of much that Bloom, Steiner, or Paglia had to say in the context of the everyday world. In sum, what I appear to be saying is that a certain madness (or "inspiration," if you prefer) is required to write a great book and that Buell is a virtuoso of sanity. Bloom, Steiner, and Paglia recognize that you *can't* make your sun stand still, so you've *got* to make him run. Buell is still hopeful that mortality can be outwitted by sheer effort, by piling Pelion upon Ossa, by carrying yet another coal to Newcastle.

Buell has one insight after another into the texts and writers he discusses, but he is like a metaphysician peeling off layer after layer of reality, ignoring the intimation that there are infinite layers for the peeling. (He is postmodern through and through. The religious call it "living without God," and it's bad. The Derrideans call it "living without a Center," and for them it's the only thing available.) If there *are* infinite layers, however, why take any layer in particular too seriously? A miss in this discourse is as good as a mile, if myriad layers still remain. It's the old story of the spider vs. the bee: the pragmatic bee sucks nectar

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from large numbers of flowers—and if he sucked nectar from just one more flower, the final honey would have a slightly different—and maybe better—taste. The spider, on the other hand, spins from his own substance (so to speak, since the substance ultimately derives from the earth). *His* effect is a sort of inspirational *ipse dixit.* The irresolvable dilemma, then, is that clear-sightedness can always in theory see more (thereby weakening what it *does* see), whereas passionate conviction and vision are always at risk of being merely demented (see Bloom, Steiner, Paglia). Buell strikes me as obsessed with the notion of being unassailable: he reviews every possibility that occurs to him, avoids rashness, balances one extreme against the other. He knows that the academy is a snake pit and he has developed eyes all over his body to avoid sneak attacks that might accuse him of anything less than omniscience and "correctness." But as an author Buell is too self-aware for his own good. He's a victim of his own cautious intelligence: he is so balanced and sane that he has sometimes balanced his thoughts right out of existence. Useful thinking requires exclusion, emphasis, preferences, commitment, willingness to risk error, because the All is indistinguishable from the Nothing. Though I am far from preferring off-the-wall maniacs to wise and deliberate sages, I feel that a book that has set its sights on capturing in some way the ecological imagination (whatever that may be) will need more than unassailable scholarly acuity and good sense to accomplish its goals. For even unassailability is assailable. *Everything* is assailable if you can't make your sun stand still.

Buell's book is not helped by the fact that four of its chapters, in whole or part, are derived from pre-existing essays and previously delivered papers that have been worked and reworked, while the remainder seemingly have not. The quality of the book's writing ranges from absolutely wretched ("This advantage the analogies of minute realism as grotesque and of ecocentrism as a code of manners underscore in different ways by calling attention to the status of nature-responsiveness as a kind of culture, or rather counterculture, that one must pursue in resistance to the intractable homocentrism in terms of which one's psychological and social worlds are always to some degree mapped") to decently serviceable (with brilliant flashes) and these disparities have more than an accidental relation to the provenance of the chapters. The more they have been worked over, the better they are. Though there are a few very good chapters, "The Thoreauvian Pilgrimage" (one of the pre-existing essays) being among the best, there are none I would call "inspired" in the sense that I discuss above. Some of the chapters, such as the one on "place," are almost unreadably dead. This is not because Buell writes the current self-parodying academic jargon (though he uses some of its key terms—and he has no trouble producing his own sesquipedalianisms and tortured syntax) but because the poorest chapters still need more rewriting and revising, or perhaps more rethinking and conviction instead of endless qualification. The book as a whole reads like a loosely thematic collection of essays rather than a treatise on

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the "environmental imagination," and it more or less just stops when it runs out of gas. The reader is never carried along by an irresistible flow. Of course one does not expect much artistry in a routine scholarly book—one is grateful for mere readability. But this purports to be more than a routine scholarly book—and while it *is* more than routine, it fails as a "book." Finally, despite his thanks to Harvard Press, they have done him little service: the book is full of typos, including the worst kind: those that form legitimate words that often make some sense (e.g.: "shippage" for "slippage"); and the copy-editing is substandard.

Buell's introductory chapter laments the abstract quality of popular environmentalism, its disconnection from everyday life, and proposes that literary works have the power to make this connection in a primal, emotional way. He notes that American Studies, unfortunately, has paid relatively little attention to environmental writing. He laments recent literary theory's disconnecting of the text, the author, and the world, turning them all into ghostly phantasms having little relation to our experience of reality. He would like, in some way, to restore the author as a flesh and blood maker of his text and he goes as far as he can along this line without making himself contemptible in the eyes of his more trend-driven colleagues. "Must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it?" This is certainly a worthy question, especially for the chess game of academic literary studies.

The introduction proceeds by examining American writing as a race-gender-class-produced thing that "otherizes" nature but, again, never going as far (to use Buell's words) as "a more radical critic" might go (though it's far enough for me). Charybdis and Scylla are Buell's constant companions: "It is no easy matter to extricate oneself from these biases, to arrive at a more ecocentric state of thinking than western culture now sustains, without falling into other biases like environmental racism."

The chapters on American pastoralism rehearse the familiar duality of the earth as nurturing mother and victim of technological rapacity, a symbol of resistance to culture as well as a model for it. The European colonizing settlers of North America thought admiringly and wrote appreciatively of the new world as a vast unspoiled pastoral wilderness that they nonetheless did not hesitate to despoil by transforming it from nature into culture. But Buell wants to see pastoral ideology as "a bridge, crude but serviceable, from anthropocentric to more specifically ecocentric concerns." He traces the evolution of pastoral ecology from Bartram's travels in the eighteenth century to Edward Abbey's Utah excursions (in *Desert Solitaire*) in the twentieth, with glances at the different points of view to be found in Native American writers. In the course of doing this he provides some keen attentions to a number of contemporaries such as Abbey, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Annie Dillard and their precursors, like Mary Austin. His hope is that pastoral vision—that is, *seeing* the earth—can be transformed from a mode of

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domination and exploitation to one of green receptivity and ecocentrism.

The recurring uneasiness that Buell feels about literary theory's disjunction between text and world, which he regards as anti-environmental in effect, issues in a desire to restore validity to the ordinary layman's immediate and unself-conscious response to literary works as representations of reality. The solace derived from nature and nature-writing by educated readers and writers such as Wordsworth and Mill is now *infra dig* in academic circles. But Buell does not believe that fictions like Cooper's *Deerslayer* and Faulkner's "Bear" are nothing more than formal or symbolic textual patterns produced in order to be shuffled around in articles and conference papers. What academics would call "naive" responses are still the ones experienced by common readers (a dwindling breed) who read for pleasure rather than professional advancement. (A recent review of a new biography of Steinbeck tells me that *The Grapes of Wrath* continues to sell fifty thousand copies a year. Somebody is apparently still reading "for the plot," but it's not Fredric Jameson.) The discrediting of realism thus exerts a pressure to produce non-ecological readings of even avowedly nature-oriented writing. Buell, of course, is quick to add that he "does not deny that they can profitably be so read," but having made this nod toward academic correctness, he manages—as much as he ever does—to hold his somewhat tentative ground in this matter for the rest of the book. Or as he puts it so characteristically, one needs to "reimagine textual representations as having a dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation." The rest of this chapter (on "Representing the Environment") becomes increasingly casuistical as it tries to sort out the claims of realism and anti-realism, fact and fiction. "Without denying that aesthetic realism can validly be characterized from one perspective as a way station on the path toward total technological control over reality, from another vantage point it signifies precisely the opposite." The returns diminish rapidly.

In a chapter on "The Aesthetics of Relinquishment" Buell looks at the sacrifice of material goods and the sacrifice of the self in the interests of nature, with emphasis on Thoreau, *Robinson Crusoe*, Wendell Berry, Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, and others. Here as throughout, there are penetrating *obiter dicta* and flashes of light, but even with all his resources Buell is unable to take wing, remaining earthbound in a way he doesn't intend: "What distinguishes *Walden* and other epics of voluntary simplicity from most traditional narrative plots, including that of *Robinson Crusoe*, is that the arrangement of its environmental furniture into linear corridors through which the protagonist strides becomes less important than what Thoreau suggestively calls deliberateness: the intensely pondered contemplation of characteristic images and events and gestures that take on a magical resonance beyond their normal importance now that the conditions of life have been simplified and the protagonist freed to appreciate how much more matters than

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what normally seems to matter." This awkward prose is the down side of an overstocked mind that struggles throughout to rise to a level of truly useful generalization, but because everything is equally true and untrue, the reader is crushed by plausible/implausible, mutually cancelling ideas.

With four dedicated chapters and a substantial appendix-essay as well as numerous *passim* references, by far the greatest number of pages and the most sustained attention of this book are given to Thoreau, confirming the avowed genesis of the project before it was ill-advisedly pumped up into "the environmental imagination." Buell's expertise on Thoreau is beyond question: with artful deployment of the materials in these chapters (which are generally the best ones in the book), a notable study could very well have been produced. Here, however, it seems to me that there is too much Thoreau for the textual environment into which he has been transplanted from Buell's earlier writings (with frequent additional recircling back to *Walden*). We are told, in the present context of a presumably general argument about environmental writing, a good deal more about Thoreau than many readers will want to know. This excess—through which Thoreau gets qualified almost out of existence—reinforces the pattern already established of too many specificities (which cancel each other out) and insufficient *memorable* generalization.

What we learn is that Thoreau became increasingly sensitized to nature for its own sake as he grew older but retained "the need to organize his observations into aesthetic patterns" (i.e., he was an artist first). His writing reveals a number of ecological "projects" (to use Buell's word), including pastoralism, religio-centric inquest into the relation of the natural to the spiritual, a pursuit of frugality and sustainable agriculture (in the face of the beginnings of agribusiness), and an interest in natural history. In these projects, Buell sees a movement from anthropocentrism toward biocentrism. But in his usual manner, he warns us against too much fetishizing of Thoreau as ecologist. Addressing Thoreau directly, he remarks: "You were groping toward an ecological vision you never grasped; your environmentalism was fitful, your biocentrism half-baked. Fine. We mustn't succumb to mindless hero-worship. . . . But neither is it productive to 'demystify' Thoreau and leave it at that."

The chapter that seemed to me perhaps the best in the book was produced from materials Buell had reused and revised a number of times, ending up here as "The Thoreauvian Pilgrimage." We get a solid historical account of the pilgrimages by famous (e.g., John Muir) and not so famous people to Concord and Walden Pond and insights into Thoreau's canonization as a culture hero, which was not nearly so much a straight trajectory as a sequence of ups and downs, ins and outs. This is again taken up and developed further in the following chapter, a quite detailed account of the publishing history of Thoreau's works, their editions, sales figures, influence on other writers, and finally the ways in

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which Thoreau has been made to serve as a motive force in the green ecology of our *fin de siècle* environmentalism. With lots of factual (as opposed to critical and hermeneutical) information at his disposal, Buell writes more gracefully and has less opportunity to indulge his Hamlet complex (i.e., since Thoreau's books were actually published in actual years, it is not equally true that they were *not* published in those same years). In all these treatments, Buell is at pains to respect the popular mind even as it distorts and exploits larger-than-life cultural icons. In this, he is refreshingly appreciative of the fact that most readers have been "common" readers and most people are not academic philosophers or literary theorists. (It probably should go without saying that he regards canonizations as both self-serving manipulations and relatively disinterested idealizations.) He therefore stresses a fact that post-deconstructive theoreticians play down or even reject: culture heroes are not just "texts" but actual flesh and blood people and their reputations are as much the result of active mythmaking about them personally as interpretations of their writings. And when Buell explicitly observes "that art is always laboriously produced by real people," I found myself writing "WOW!" in the margin. After years of academic theory-spinning, a return to the disparaged vulgar world of "common sense" can seem pretty daring. Of course, Buell never forgets to guard his flanks: "Now, it is hardly clear that restoring a messy intersubjective model of writing and reading will solve all the problems of the world. But we are more likely to make progress if we imagine texts as emanating in the first instance from responsible agents communicating with other responsible agents than if we imagine texts without agency inhabiting discursive force fields." As they used to say in the olden days: "Right on!"

The appendix to this book, "Nature's Genres: Environmental Non-fiction at the Time of Thoreau's Emergence" is a solid study of the sources and influences that helped to produce Thoreau's writings. It is a virtuoso performance by someone whose memory of the exact words of myriad texts is far out of the ordinary. Buell has almost been able to reconstruct the mental library that conduced to the subject position, as we now call it, that Thoreau came to occupy—and he does this without destroying Thoreau's own agency as a person.

But as I warned at the beginning, I have said very little about the contents of this book, contents that are full to the point of overflowing. By the time I reached the final page, however, I had forgotten almost all of it. What remained sharply delineated in retrospect was the character of the performance itself. To me, it's a troubling phenomenon, an exemplar of "the postmodern condition." In his book of that title, Lyotard told us we are living in an information age in which data is power. But Buell's nervous and fretful databank is a symptom of powerlessness made all the more vulnerable by today's non-judgmental egalitarianism, its equal-opportunity dialectic. One senses a prophetic yearning and a desire to hold opinions, which now and then manage to

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ooze through the crevices of the "beautiful mosaic" (as Mayor Dinkins once optimistically described "diversity"), but the dialectical data keep multiplying like a computer virus, stanching the flow of conviction—which has already been weakened by a fear of academic censure. The "person" behind the book comes off as a socially constructed sorcerer's apprentice who has unleashed a power he is ultimately unable to control—and he gets trampled in the process. I say without irony that I hoped he would prevail.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JOSEPH EPSTEIN's "The Pleasures of Reading" was first delivered as the 1994 Rita Diamandopoulos Lecture at Adelphi University. A forthcoming contribution in *The Hudson Review* will be an essay on the life and work of Robert Lowell.... DAVID MASON's new collection of poems, *The Country I Remember*, will be published by Story Line Press in April 1996. The title poem was first published in *The Hudson Review*.... RANDOLPH THOMAS* lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas. His work has appeared in *Farmer's Market* and *Poetry*, among other publications.... MADISON SMARTT BELL, currently writer-in-residence at Goucher College, recently published his eighth novel, *All Souls' Rising* (Pantheon).... MICHAEL VAN WALLEGHEN's most recent book of poems, *Tall Birds Stalking*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1994.... ROBERT PHILLIPS' fifth poetry collection, *Breakdown Lane*, was published by Johns Hopkins University Press, and was named a Notable Book of 1994 by *The New York Times Book Review*.... ALLEN HOEY is a professor at Bucks County Community College and a student of Zen Buddhism.... CATHLEEN CALBERT* teaches at Rhode Island College.... PATTIANN ROGERS' sixth book, *Firekeeper: New and Selected Poems*, was published by Milkweed Editions.

TIMOTHY MURPHY* is a North Dakota farmer and venture capitalist.... ROBIN S. CHAPMAN's manuscript *The Way In* was a finalist in the Brittingham 1994 contest.... STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT's most recent book is *Reading William Blake* (Macmillan, 1992).... PATRICIA GOEDICKE's eleventh book of poetry, *Invisible Horses*, is scheduled for publication in March 1996.... BERT CARDULLO is co-translator and co-editor, respectively, of two forthcoming books: *Bazin at Work: Selected Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties* from Routledge; and *Film Actors on Film Acting*, from Yale.... JOHN LOUGHERY is the author most recently of *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (Henry Holt).... SUSAN BALÉE is assistant professor of English at Beaver College and the editor of *Northeast Corridor*, a nationally-distributed literary magazine.... JOHN HAINES has a new collection of essays, *Fables and Distances*, forthcoming from Graywolf Press in February 1996.... GARY KRIST's first novel, *A Perfect Animal*, is due in about a year from Random House.... THOMAS FILBIN's reviews have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. He lives in Massachusetts.... Last June, HAROLD FROMM attended the first conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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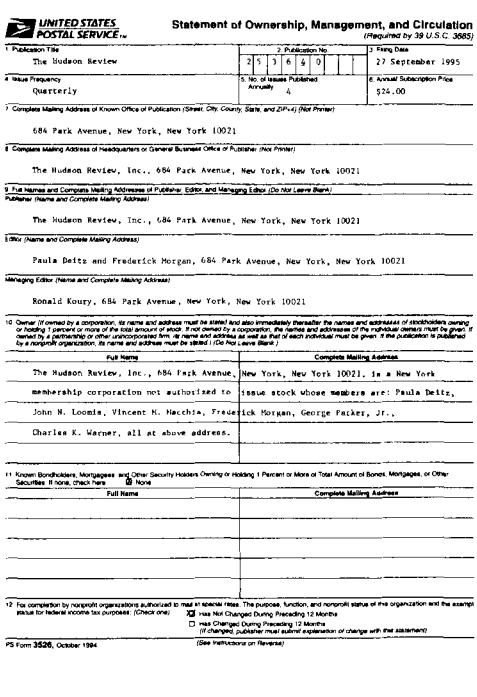

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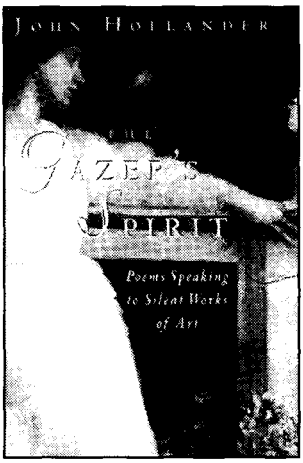

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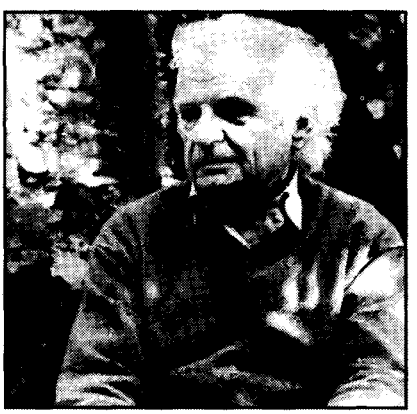

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IN THIS ISSUE:

What wide reading teaches is the richness, the complexity, the mystery of life. In the wider and longer view, I have come to believe, there is something deeply apolitical—something above politics—in literature, despite what feminist, Marxist, and other politicized literary critics may think. If at the end of a long life of reading the chief message you bring away is that women have had it lousy, or that capitalism stinks, or that attention must above all be paid to victims, then I'd say you just might have missed something crucial.

—Joseph Epstein, "The Pleasures of Reading," p. 539.

All black people who have ever died in Haiti (and over the three hundred years since slavery was first introduced there this must make a very large number) inhabit a place called the Island Below Sea, which is also Guinée, or Africa. During the slave trade many captives jumped from the ships to drown themselves, believing that by this route they would return to Africa. Today the *vaudou* conception of Guinée has evolved into a spiritual location; the Island Below Sea is a parallel universe reflecting our own, but still believers must enter it. So at the beginning of *vaudou* rituals, they sing *o creole, sondé miroir,* an exhortation to *pierce the mirror,* so that the spirits of the living can once more reach Guinée, so that the souls of the dead can also reach the living world as *loa*—the pantheon of gods who take possession of their worshipers.

—Madison Smartt Bell, "Miroir Danjere," p. 587.

We may feel isolated from each other, from God, from any meaning we have desired, but the language of poetry can't help being a kind of ceremony. It insists, sometimes against all reason, that we are not alone, that our most intimate or noble, trivial or terrible natures are already understood.

—David Mason,
"The Poetry of Life and the Life of Poetry," p. 556.

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